

We Soar Above the Clouds

by Rays of Color

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Summary: Sequel to 'As The Skies Open'. A female Hiccup explores life several years after becoming Berk's savior, and finds that life never fails to surprise her with its twists and turns. UPDATE: the grand adventure draws near, but where has Toothless gone, with a tail he can operate all by himself?

1. Winter Chill

****A/N:**** Hey there! Yes, I'm back, and yes, this is (going to be) the sequel to 'As the Skies Open', titled '****We Soar Above the Clouds****'. :) I wanted to give you this first chapter earlier than I was planning as a little gift. I'm not sure when the next one will be up, but I figured at least you guys will have a chapter so you know I haven't just dropped my AtSO-verse off a cliff or something.

Please, please, leave me reviews so I know if this story is coming along well. As I've mentioned to some of you, this sequel is not going to follow any HTTYD material; it's entirely my own work now. While it's exciting, it's also kind of scary, because I have nothing but your feedback to let me know if I'm on the right track. So I'm counting on you to help me out here, please and thank you. :)

Please bear in mind the first few chapters are going to be a tad slow. I won't really get into the core/point of this story for several chapters, so please just hang in there with me and keep reading!

Thank you guys for all your support on AtSO, this sequel never would have happened without your love making it as successful and fun to write as it was. I'm glad to be back, glad to write Hiccup and Toothless and all these other characters that have taken residence in my head, and I hope you enjoy! It's not quite a teaser, since it's a full chapter, and I'll try to post the next chapter as soon as possible

Thanks again to all my faithful readers!

~Rays of Color

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><p>Chapter One: Winter Chill

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><p>The setting sun blazed in the later winter sky. Few gulls stirred, as it was still too cold for much animal activity, and the late afternoon passed in a peaceful quiet. Snow still blanketed much of Berk and the rest of the isle, but some of the sunnier cliffs remained bare, warmed by the sea and the absence of shading trees. The winds subsided today, leading to an almost-glassy surface on the water.<p>

A dark shape lay atop one of these bluffs, overlooking the gray-blue winter sea. The Night Fury sprawled contentedly on the rocks, warmed by the fire in his belly against the chill that came from being a few degrees South of Freezing-to-Death. The human who reclined against his flank was not so lucky; she was swaddled in many layers of clothing to ward off the cold. A long bear-fur cloak wrapped around her, underneath which a woolen, fur lined mantle covered thin shoulders. The girl also wore a thick woolen tunic that nearly reached her knees, a warm, long-sleeved undershirt underneath that, and a pair of thick leggings. Despite her many layers, only the dragon's warm presence at her back kept her from shivering.

Hiccup had to fight her father to let her go out flying for very long at all. She understood he had a reason to be concerned â€" her health had always been frail at best, and more than half her winters resulted in her being bedridden for weeks. Cold didn't agree well with Hiccup, which was ironic given her clan lived in one of the northern-most locations she knew.

But the fact remained that she couldn't stand to be out of the sky for long, and neither could Toothless. The past two days, with their raging winds and stinging, wet snow, had been miserable. Hiccup _knew _it would be stupid to brave the weather, for she'd just ridden herself of uncomfortable, wracking coughs and was in no hurry to get sick all over again. But with a today, with weather that was as pleasant as Berk saw in winter, she could restrain herself no longer. She woke up early, threw on as many layers as she could stand, and she and Toothless rushed outside; her father's concerns had only waylaid them for minute or two.

Their entire day was spent in the cool sunshine, and both Hiccup and Toothless reveled in the rushing air. Even now, a little more than two and a half years since her village had honored her at Champions' Tower, Hiccup still felt more at home in the air than she did on the ground. It was amazing and wonderful to be accepted by her people; but Hiccup was still very different. She always had been, and always would be. Berk accepted her, but no one really understood her. She was still an oddity, albeit a respected one. So the air remained her escape.

Plus, she needed to get out of the house. With her seventeenth birthday and coming-of-age around the corner, her father had tried to

broach the subject of succession several times. Both she and Snotlout were eligible heirs, and recently her relations with her cousin had been rather strained. She knew he wanted to be chief; up until the battle with the Green Death, everyone had expected it to be him without question. Now things were more complicated. Hiccup still didn't know if she wanted to be chief, if she wanted to shoulder that heavy responsibility. No matter what, Toothless would always come first in her life; her abilities as a chief might suffer under the strain of coming second to a dragon who needed her to fly.

She scratched absently at that dragon's hide as she continued to think. No one was as important in her life as Toothless. Not Astren, her boyfriend of more than two years, not even her father. That was another thing the villagers simply didn't get; their dragons were indeed important to them, but everyone had at least one human relationship that remained more important. Not so for Hiccup; she often speculated that even if her mother were still alive, Toothless would outrank even that incredible woman.

To be fair, Hiccup's extreme loyalty was exactly mirrored by the Night Fury. He saved her life more times than she cared to remember (mostly because reliving a near-death experience was not her idea of a pleasant time), and protected her fiercely. For all his retractable teeth and razor-like claws, though, he was also incredibly cuddly. Every night, he curled up on her bed, his breath taking on a cat-like purring as they drifted off to sleep (Hiccup had discovered on a short trip to visit the Meatheads, who remained tense and borderline hostile around dragons, that it was nearly impossible for her to fall asleep without that sound). More often than not, Hiccup would wake up to a large, lithe black wing draped over her in an absent-minded gesture that read both protectiveness and affection.

Plus, she thought as she turned to see Toothless munching on a fish, she couldn't ask for a better friend in all the world. Regardless of the fact that she remained unable to understand his language (for she was sure Toothless did speak, just that they had no way to cross the barrier), there was no one with whom she communicated as well. The language thing had bothered her off and on over the past years, however. Toothless was always so patient on the occasions when body language and basic gestures, failed them, and she had to simply guess at what he was trying to say. Furthermore, sometimes she just wanted to hear what he had to say. She was sure it would be fascinating to talk, really talk, to the mighty Fury who was her best friend.

The sun sank even further, and Hiccup sighed, struggling to gain her feet under the many layers of fur and cloth that kept her from freezing.

"C'mon bud," she smiled at Toothless, "we'd better head back before I turned into a icicle."

The Fury snorted, but shook himself as he rose to pad next to his human. He interrupted the girl as she rubbed her hands to restore some warmth to them; with a gentle whuff, he breathed hot air right onto her chilled fingers. Hiccup beamed at him, touched by the gesture. Her hands now warm, she swung herself up into the black leather saddle with an ease born of years of practice.

Although, she mused, it was rather ironic that she could throw herself into the saddle at a moment's notice, yet she still struggled

with walking. The bitterness that threatened to cloud her happy mood quickly melted away as Toothless launched them both into the sunset, the orange lighting casting Berk in a homey, warm light. Hiccup enjoyed the flight home despite the biting cold, and reluctantly slid down from the saddle when Toothless landed. She removed the saddle from his shoulders, knowing her friend was more comfortable sleeping without it on. Her fingers only fumbled a few times, even with the cold so familiar were the movements.

"There you go, Bud," she smiled at the dragon, saddle bundled up under one arm while her free hand reached out to pat the Fury. He whuffed gently at her, his hot breath warming the few bits of skin exposed to the winter air, and she laughed. "Let's go home, you goof."

Together, they began trudging through the snow, up the hill to the Chief's house. Hiccup supposed she could have gone straight to the Great Hall for dinner, but she wanted to get Toothless' saddle oiled and put away before eating. Three years experience had taught her it was better to take good care of the gear she created for Toothless, rather than it wearing out more quickly and giving without warning (like that time a year and a half ago when one of the main straps on Toothless' saddle had sheared unexpectedly. Mid-flight. Stoick was furious, having seen her fall from his position on the ground. She suspected it was too similar to how she fell after defeating the Green Deaths for her father's comfort. Luckily, Toothless' quick reactions saved her again.) so dinner would just have to wait.

Toothless walked in front of her, his large body breaking up the snow to allow Hiccup easier passage. She was straggling just a little bit, struggling to find footing on the icier layers underneath with her prosthetic, when another person crashed straight into her.

With a grunt, Hiccup tumbled to the ground, one cheek mashed against the dirty sleet that had long since frozen to the ground. A surprised 'oof' from the body next to her showed the other person hadn't even seen her.

"Sorry," Hiccup began, rolling over and sitting up. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Toothless a few yards away whip his head around as he realized she wasn't right behind him. "I didn't see yâ€œ"

The other viking raised their head, and Hiccup stopped short. She was face to face with Jabtooth, her worst childhood bully. In the last three years, she'd only crossed paths with the older girl twice â€œ She worked at the blacksmith and taught willing townspeople how to fly, while Jabtooth worked down at the docks. Those two encounters had been tense, not a word spoken between them. Jabtooth ended up clenching her sturdy fists, apparently fighting down an aggressive urge, while Hiccup had ended up freezing on the spot, eyes wide and forcibly keeping herself from backing away from the larger girl.

Now, Hiccup had to suppress that same reaction. She belonged here in Berk, she was a hero, and she wouldn't let anyone make her feel inferior anymore. Not even a childhood demon. Swallowing hard, she jerkily pushed off the ground and staggered to her feet. Jabtooth stood much more gracefully (after all, _she_ hadn't lost part of a

leg saving a village that wanted nothing to do with her and treated her like scum, Hiccup couldn't help but thinking rather bitterly), brushing herself off before she suddenly tensed.

A hot puff of air rushed past Hiccup, and she knew Toothless stood at her back, mostly likely glaring at Jab. He was likely just overprotective and concerned; the Night Fury had never met Jabtooth before, knew nothing of the history between the two girls (he hadn't been there the two times since the Battle that she'd run across Jab). Still, it would be a good idea to diffuse the situation, now. Jabtooth, as far as Hiccup could tell, was one of the Vikings that still wasn't completely comfortable around dragons, and being face to face with their former worst enemy could prod the brutish girl into lashing out. Hiccup would rather not have to explain why Toothless had torn a villager to shreds to anyone.

"Toothless, stop, it was just an accident," she turned, one gloved hand stroking the dragon's snout. He huffed again, and then inhaled, looking like he was about to relax. Some scent must have caught his attention though, for his eyes narrowed sharply.

Her last thought was oh NO, before Hiccup flung herself at the dragon in a desperate attempt to stop his imminent attack.

* * *

><p>He'd turned his head when he heard Hiccup grunt; likely, she'd just stumbled on the ice (she didn't possess claws like his to anchor her in place on the frozen hillside) but it was always, *always* *a* better idea to double check where his human was concerned. She had a decided knack for getting into trouble.

He found two bodies sprawled in the snow â€" the slight one was Hiccup, swaddled in furs and wool to protect her scrawny frame from the cold. The bulkier one was a stranger, but the style of clothing told him it was a villager. It was a female, too, although her face was much more square and threatening than his Hiccup's open, friendly features. He sent his best glare at the unfamiliar female. As a local, she probably meant no harm to Hiccup (her rather fickle clan practically worshipped the ground his human walked on now, although their treatment had been cruel before she saved them all. His blood still simmered, remembering an afternoon where Hiccup showed up in their cove with a bruised face and an unfamiliar scent after being beaten by one of her kin.). Still, it wouldn't hurt to establish the pecking order with this stranger, so Toothless gave her his best glare â€" eyelids shaping his eyes to look more elongated than round, pupils narrowing to predatory slits, upper lip curled in a snarl to reveal a row of pointy silver teeth.

He rather enjoyed the stranger's look of fear. Hiccup, however, was not pleased with him, urging him to stop scaring the townsgirl. Of course, he was powerless to deny her when she scratched his snout like she was currently, and this stranger posed no apparent threat, so he dropped the glare and huffed, drawing in a fresh breath of wintry air.

That was when he caught the scent. The scent from that afternoon all those years ago, with a shaken and bruised Hiccup. The scent of her tormentor. The village was too swimming with people and dragons and livestock for him to have picked it out earlier, but here, with few

people out and about and the chill erasing any old scents, he caught it anew.

Die, worthless human, he roared as he lunged forward, intent of destroying this human who had dared to hurt his Hiccup.

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><p>AN**: and that's the end of the chapter! Oh, come on, I couldn't help myself with the cliffhanger. I have to give you some incentive to stick around!

Please drop me a review, your feedback is my guiding light on this story, as explained above. Also, I'm always here to answer PM's, so feel free to message me, it absolutely makes my day!

2. Uncomfortable, Even Now

A/N: Hello again my dears! Here's the long-awaited (except not actually) second chapter of the As The Skies Open sequel, We Soar Above the Clouds. Keep in s, input, ideas, or critiques, please don't hesitate to drop me a review and let me know. As always, I love getting PM's, so don't hesitate to mind that these first several chapters are an introduction, a prelude in a way, so bear with me as it will take a few more chapters to really get into the meat of the story. In the meantime, I've done my best to keep the introduction interesting and set up all the characters believably. If you have any commentmessage me if you want (it always makes my day :))

Enjoy the next chapter, and I'll try to post again soon!

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><p>Chapter Two: Uncomfortable, Even Now

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><p>A split second before the Night Fury lunged, Hiccup knew Toothless was about to attack. She saw it in the tensed muscles of his neck, the line of his shoulder blades, the narrowing of his pupils. There was only a moment for her to react in, and react she did. Right as he roared forward, Hiccup threw herself directly in the dragon's path, arms spread wide. Silver teeth rushed toward her throat, and â€"p>

And they froze only inches from her skin. Toothless screeched to a halt, flaring his wings and lashing his tail around his body to curb his momentum, every fiber in his body straining to avoid collision and the injury it would cause Hiccup's frail body.

Practically nose to nose, she could see his eyes change from angry to panicked; he began sniffing at her, oh-so-gently prodding her with his snout to make sure he hadn't hurt her.

"I'm fine, Toothless, you didn't do anything to me," she spoke quickly, one hand rubbing across his scales soothingly. "But you can't attack Jabtooth," she added, tone firm.

He jerked his head back, pupils narrowing in what she guessed was

outrage and anger.

"_No_, Toothless," she commanded. With a sinking feeling, she thought she knew what this was about. He had a similar expression years ago, after she showed up in their cove with a bruised face post Jabtooth run-in. "You cannot attack a villager unless they're actually hurting me! You can't go after someone on a years-old grudge!"

He merely snarled, peering past her to glare at Jabtooth, whom Hiccup guessed was still frozen in place.

"She hasn't touched me in years, Bud, and you know it," the younger girl chided, hands propped on bony hips. When he didn't budge, she sighed, lowering her voice. She didn't want Jabtooth to hear what she had to say next, still felt vulnerable and exposed and despised in the older girl's presence, even with Toothless so close. "_Please_, Toothless. For me. I don't want to dig up old demons, life is complicated enough as it is."

He held his stance for another long moment, and then relaxed with a huff. Hiccup relaxed too, turning to face Jabtooth. The brawnier girl was still sitting on the ground, frozen with an alarmed expression and wide eyes.

"Sorry, he can be temperamental at times," Hiccup babbled, grasping for an excuse other than '_he wants to kill you because you hurt me once'_. As much as the sentiment warmed her heart (in an odd way, because Hiccup was pretty sure she should be upset at him for nearly killing a villager, but she couldn't because that villager was the nightmare of her childhood. Jabtooth was the one who started teasing and tormenting Hiccup only a month or two after Valhallarama's death, the one who first established Hiccup as the village scapegoat and nuisance. Toothless was only trying to protect her; he was the only one who ever saw the full extent of the damage those years caused. Gobber, Astren, her dad, they all knew bits and pieces, but never the whole thing.), she figured the explanation would be taken poorly by Jabtooth and the villagers. Most had adapted very well to life lived alongside dragons, but a small number of villagers remained unhappy and apprehensive about the newest additions to village life. She knew Jabtooth was one of them, for the older girl still had not bonded with a dragon. "We've had a long day, he's kinda cranky," she continued to lie, as Jabtooth slowly got to her feet.

"Yeah. Sure," Jabtooth responded curtly, alternating between nervously watching Toothless to staring at Hiccup as if she had two heads. She darted off as soon as she was back on her feet, moving remarkably quickly for such a lumbering frame.

Then again, Hiccup thought with a tinge of bitterness, Jab had always been fast enough to catch up to her.

A low growl roused her from her thoughts; Toothless was glaring at the buildings Jabtooth had disappeared between.

"Stop that," she chided gently, stroking the top of his head. "You're scaring the villagers."

Indeed he was, as several nearby townspeople halted in their tracks or headed the other direction, clearly unnerved by an angry Night Fury. He huffed, but fully relaxed at last. His head turned, butting

against her shoulder joint as he nuzzled at her. She giggled, patting his head and receiving a low rumbling purr in return. Sometimes he was nothing more than a giant, cuddly, scaled cat.

"Let's go home, bud," she said softly. "Y'know, before you try to kill anyone else."

Even when she turned around and began limping uphill, she could hear his indignant chirrup.

"Yeah, I know, I know, only people who you think deserve it. Still, I'd rather not deal with the fuss, thanks," she responded playfully. A couple passers-by gave her odd looks; although most riders spoke to their dragons, few carried on (seemingly one-sided) conversations with their companions. Surprise, surprise, even now Hiccup was an oddity. Although, she thought wryly, when had she ever truly expected to blend in?

By the time she got to the door of her house, at the top of the hill, her bad leg ached as it always did. Three years after the battle, her leg was fully healed but not fully functional, even with a prosthetic. Gobber thought it was because of how weak she was afterward; she'd spent three weeks in a coma, two with a terrible fever, and by the end of the third they began to worry about her succumbing to malnutrition. When she woke, she was weaker than she'd ever felt; before she lost her leg, she was scrawny and small, with little spare weight to lose. After, she'd been rail-thin. Just finding the energy to move had been a struggle for weeks. She was emaciated and sickly for months before her body recovered enough to return to a healthy weight — she'd always been slow to heal, and slower to put on weight. With her recovery so protracted, she supposed it was no surprise her limp had stuck. On good days, it was present but hardly slowed her down; on bad days, she could barely support her own weight. But through it all, Toothless was at her side, lending support both literal and metaphorical. She smiled at him now, as she pushed the door open.

"Hey, Dad," She greeted as she stepped inside. As soon as the door closed, Hiccup began shedding her many layers, for the fireplace sported a roaring blaze and the house was too warm for her snow clothes.

"Evenin', Hiccup," her father rumbled from his seat next to the fire. He sipped at a steaming beverage while absently looking over a map spread across his lap. "I brought ye dinner from the Hall, thought ye might be hungry after all that flyin'."

A delighted smile spread across her face — Stoick had become a much more attentive father after the Battle and Hiccup's injury, but displays of affection still aren't exactly common or comfortable. This, however, him bringing her dinner so she won't have to venture back out into the snow, is perfect. It shows them both that he cares without being too emotional, which is Hiccup's personal favorite, for neither of them are good with emotions.

"Thanks, Dad," she sighed as a whiff of food caught her attention. "I'm starving, I'll eat as soon as I undo Toothless' gear."

As Hiccup released Toothless from his tack, Stoick continued speaking.

"I also brought home a fish fer yer Fury, figured he'd eat while ye were flyin' but wouldn't mind a snack either."

The last of the gear freed from Toothless, Hiccup deposited it in the cubby underneath the stairs sized especially for holding the stuff, and made her way over to her father to give him a brief hug. He often got cross with Toothless (nothing serious, but both are easily irritated with one another; Toothless when he thought Stoick was too brusque with Hiccup, Stoick when he thought Toothless was overstepping his bounds as a dragon in a human household. They'd been testy around each other for a week when Toothless began sleeping in Hiccup's bed as a source of comfort to ward off her frequent nightmares.), so for him to bring dinner for both his daughter and her dragon was a rather big step in the ongoing battle for peace between a Viking Chief and his former worst enemy.

"Thanks," she repeated as she hugged him, and for a short moment Stoick's large arms closed around her narrow shoulders, one hand patting her snow-damp hair. They both pulled away just a moment later, avoiding each other's eyes, and clearing their throats awkwardly.

Right. Emotions, uncomfortable, especially around her father.

But still, she thought as she tossed the fish her dad brought home to Toothless and took her seat at the table to eat her dinner, it's better than before.

As she munched the last bits of her dinner, a jaw-cracking yawn made her pause with food halfway to her mouth. It was a big enough yawn to make her tired eyes water, and she heard her father chuckle fondly.

"Alrigh', off ta bed with ye, before ye fall asleep at the table," he said, pointing towards her room upstairs. Hiccup dragged herself away from the table and to her room, Toothless at her side to ease her passage up the stairs on tired legs. She stripped off the rest of her clothes once in her room, exchanging them for a warm nightgown, and paused on the edge of her bed to remove her prosthetic. Once it rested against the bedpost, she scooted to the center of the bed, drawing the covers up to her chin and patting the blankets for Toothless to jump up.

Once he settled, curled at the end of her too-large bed, Hiccup closed her eyes. Exhaustion pulled at her, but a vague, unsettling feeling kept her awake. She knew from experience that ignoring it would only delay sleep, and possibly even cause nightmares depending on what was bothering her, so the only option was to pick the feeling apart until she understood.

It had started before she got home, that she was sure of. Perhaps it was lingering adrenaline from Toothless trying to bite Jabtooth's head off? Not quite right, she thought. If she were to be honest, it sprung up the moment she recognized Jabtooth.

Dammit.

She knew what this meant â€" it would be a restless night. These moods struck rarely, only a few times over the last few years, but

they were miserable and left her with insomnia. She was also cranky the next day, from the last lingering traces of these dark moods and the lack of sleep.

She was angry. Angry, upset, resentful. At her village, her friends, her father.

Most of the time, she was grateful for how she was treated now. As the hero of her village, she was treated with respect (if not always understanding, but that was also part of the problem). She had friends, a boyfriend, peers that no longer tormented her. It was a lot to appreciate, given how she used to be treated.

And that was what made her angry; she shouldn't have to be appreciative. She never should have been subjected to those years of torment in the first place! For nine years she was an outcast in everything but name, and even then she was pretty sure it was only her status as the chief's only child that kept the villagers from running her out of town. She hated it. She hated that for nine years, the village at large thought it was acceptable to scorn her, turn their backs on her, laugh at her.

She hated that the only reason they'd changed their opinions on her was because she'd nearly lost her life saving close to half the village. She hated that most of them still didn't even try to understand her, merely tolerated her strangeness because she'd saved them. She was still a nuisance, but one they treated nicely instead of poorly.

She hated how quickly opinions of her changed. Her friends only became her friends because she'd started succeeding in training, and then turned their backs the moment she was disgraced. Of course, they'd reformed the tentative friendship when they accompanied her on dragon-back to take on the Green Death, but the point still stood. Even Astren was the same; he'd hated her, and then his opinion suddenly changed. She didn't understand it; how could such a quick change of opinion be anything other than fickle?

The village liked her for being their savior. Her status as savior overruled her status as Hiccup. But she was still Hiccup, she was still the girl everyone had called a curse and a disappointment. They didn't mind now, but they sure had minded before she'd saved them.

She was still an outsider, she brooded. She always would be, in this village. There was no chance of her truly belonging, she would always be too different. Angry moisture gathered in her eyes as she bit back a shaky breath.

She also hated that something as small as an encounter with Jabtooth could shake her happiness so easily. Just a minute in the presence of the bane of her childhood, and all the old insecurities and hurt came tumbling back the moment she stopped to think. It was ridiculous, she should be stronger than this! She'd befriended a Night Fury, taken on a mountain of a dragon and won, saved a village from destruction, both short- and long-term. She shouldn't dissolve into angry helplessness so quickly.

And yet she here she was. Hiccup groaned and punched her pillow in frustration. She felt like she was drowning in a cycle of anger that

fueled helplessness that fueled anger.

A soft croon and a shift of her bed refocused her attention. Toothless had crawled alongside her, his yellow-green eyes watching hers patiently. He huffed at her, warm breath washing over her face and easing some of the tension from her body. Hiccup even smiled a bit as he nuzzled at her, draping a wing over the lump her body made in the blankets.

"Thanks, Bud," she whispered, snuggling closer. The heat that radiated off his scales soothed her further, lulling her away from her anger. She had no reason to be angry with her Night Fury; he'd saved her life over and over, putting his at risk many times in the process. He stuck by her, always. He accepted her unconditionally, and gave her his undying loyalty. The thought brought a fond smile to her face. He had her undying loyalty as well; she needed him as much as he needed her. Everything would be alright with Toothless around.

She loved him dearly, and with that she was able to drift off to sleep. Her black mood, for the first time ever, had been cut short.

Hiccup slept soundly through the night, and when she woke beneath Toothless' protectively curled wing, any lingering resentment towards her village and its people evaporated. After all, there was no point harboring grudges over wounds years old. She was better off moving forward with her life. After all, she was coming of age soon, and she didn't want childhood hurts to hinder her transition into adulthood. She had a lot of important decisions to make soon.

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><p>AN:** sorry it's not a longer chapter, but I thought it was important to cut it off here. I think a critical part of Hiccup's character and conflict at this point in her life is dealing with such a radical and sudden switch in social status. She literally went from zero to hero in one day. While I think she would mostly be grateful for the shift, there's no way those years of being treated so poorly would vanish all the way. To act like she feel 100% a part of the community would be an unrealistic lie, and would cheat Hiccup of her hard-earned depth of character.

Also, reminder that this sequel is coming entirely out of my own brain, which means that your comments and critiques are my guidance. So thank you so much again for all your support and help, I love you guys, and I'll post again soon!

3. Beginnings

**A/N: **Hey again guys! It's been about a month since the last update, so I figured you guys deserved a new chapter (I'm super generous or something) :P

Again, not a huge chapter, but does have important content, especially since we keep getting closer to the actual "start" of the story. Also, there is some more Astren in this chapter, for those of you who are fans.

Enjoy, and as always, leave me feedback, it keeps me motivated and on track, and it makes sure that the quality of my storytelling stays good. :D Thanks for your overwhelming support, as always, it means so much to me.

ON WITH THE STORY!

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><p>Chapter Three: Beginnings

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><p>A few weeks later, Hiccup woke to weak sunlight streaming through her window. She smiled " it was the end of February, the freezing weather and sleet normally stopped about this time of year. While it would remain cold enough to keep ice on the small lakes and streams for weeks yet, they didn't get much snow past the end of February, which meant unrestricted flying for her and Toothless.<p>

Furthermore, tomorrow was her birthday and coming-of-age. She would be seventeen, old enough to be treated as a full adult in Viking society. While that made her nervous, to some extent, she was also excited. She had idea of what she wanted for her birthday, but she needed to do some more research before she shared this idea with Stoick. Therefore, it was off to the Great Hall today, to the small back room where most of the books were kept. She was near giddy with excitement. Even without her research to spur her on, Hiccup loved delving into the pile of musty books. Just the thought of old, dusty parchment under her fingers made her smile.

She hauled herself to the edge of her bed, expertly strapped on her prosthetic, and stripped off her nightgown on her way to her water bowl. She dunked her hair, and splashed her face hastily, clearing her features of the last remnants of sleep. Still dripping, she pulled clean clothes out of the trunk at the base of her bed. Instead of her usual tunic and leggings, she slipped on a green skirt with gray embroidery over gray woolen pants. Then it was on with a cream colored shirt, the sleeves falling nearly to her fingertips, and green vest that would keep her torso warm. Over it all, she threw on her bearskin cloak, fastening it about her shoulders.

"Hey, lazybutt," she called playfully, sliding on her right boot and tossing the long-unused left one at Toothless' head. The large lizard was still dozing away on her bed. She missed, of course, but the boot did manage to clip his shoulder. Toothless shook himself, opened one reluctant eye and warbled at her in discontent. "Come on, Bud, I need to go to read some books!"

He huffed fussily, but stretched and hopped down off her bed. His wings stretched out, filling the full expanse of her room before they were fully stretched. Shaking himself, he followed her down the stairs and out the door, drawing up alongside the girl so that she could use his shoulder for extra support on the slippery, sleety ground.

They were most of the way to the Great Hall when running footsteps caught up to them.

"Good morning," a familiar voice called. Hiccup peered over her shoulder, smiling at Astren as he jogged up to them.

"Hey, you," she responded and then shrieked with laughter as her boyfriend of nearly three years picked her up and swung her around. He set her down before she got too dizzy, and planted a quick kiss on her lips. "Not that I mind, but why such an enthusiastic greeting this morning?"

"No reason," he responded quickly. "Well, you do look especially nice today. And it's your birthday tomorrow. And why not?"

"Alright," she shook her head at the mildly uncharacteristic behavior. "Whatever you say, weirdo."

"What are you up to?" Astren asked as they continued their walk. Hiccup watched him in the morning light. Now seventeen (he'd turn eighteen in a few months), he was both taller and broader than he used to be, covered in gradually-bulking muscle. His hair was shorter, and a shade darker than the golden blond it used to be, the longest strands laying against the nape of his neck. He now sported dark gold stubble across his jaw, the beginnings of a beard trimmed close for the time being. His eyes were as blue as ever, but his face had lost its last remnants of roundness and was now all strong lines. By no means was he as bulky as the average viking, but he was as tall, and in a few years Hiccup guessed he would match their stature. Next to him, she felt tiny.

Granted, the past years had given her a couple of additional inches. Still, she remained decisively miniscule for a Viking; Astren towered over her. Even now, she struggled to fill the image of a proper Viking woman. Her face had lost some of its childishness as her cheeks lost some of their roundness, cheekbones and browbones and jawbones that slightest bit more pronounced. Her hair grew out a bit, now falling past the tops of her shoulders. She gained back the weight that she'd lost in recovering from the Battle with the Green Death, but her body remained too weak and scrawny by far for Viking standards. The idea of her filling out the breastplates that many women wore was downright laughable.

Still, Astren showed no dislike for how she looked. In fact, he seemed to enjoy it, as he picked her up and swung her around in greeting more and more frequently.

"Off to the library for research," she replied brightly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a fond smile cross his lips at her uncharacteristic-for-a-Viking enthusiasm towards books.

"Alright, weirdo," he teased her back. "Take a break from the books in a few hours and join me in a few hours for lunch, will you?"

"Sorry, I need to get through this stuff as fast as possible. I wanna ask my dad for a special birthday gift, but I have to research it first," she shook her head. "But how about dinner?"

"Fine, meet me in the Great Hall at sunset. And I call dibs on you from midday till sunset tomorrow, deal?"

"Deal," Hiccup beamed, standing on tiptoe to kiss him. He kissed her back thoroughly, hands warm and firm where he held onto her arms, hers playing with his collar. She pulled back after several moments. "Okay, now stop distracting me!" she pushed at him playfully.

"Alright, alright, I'm going!"

She watched his retreating form for a few moments before turning back to Toothless. She stumbled forward as his huff of air ruffled her hair. The dragon could hardly contain his enthusiasm, he enjoyed the library nearly as much as she did. The windowless room was pleasantly musty, walls close, almost cave-like.

Of course, her dragon would benefit from the work she was doing today, but he didn't know that. If Stoick let her have this gift, it would be her gift to Toothless; she didn't know his actual birthday, so she chose hers for them to share. Perhaps it was silly to give a dragon an honorary birthday, for they lived so long she doubted it mattered.

But dammit, Toothless was hers, and if she wanted to give him a gift on their shared 'birthdays', then she would.

"Okay, I get it," she sighed with fond exasperation as he kept butting his snout against her back. She started walking, allowing him urge her along their path. "I'm going, I'm going. For a flying lizard, you sure like the library."

Toothless half-crooned, half-growled at her. Hiccup recognized the tell-tale signs of his impatience and picked up her pace without any further complaints. As they walked side-by-side, her thoughts once again turned to a question that kept pestering her.

If Toothless could speak to her, some sort of word-based language and not the croons and growls and rumbles she had long since interpreted, what would he say?

>Perhaps it was a waste of time to consider such questions. It would probably take magic to accomplish, and thus was a fool's errand. There was no magic, no gnomes, no trolls. She knew that, Hiccup scolded herself as she entered the Great Hall and headed up the staircase at the back of the room.<p>

Still, what was the harming in looking into it, at least a little bit? She already planned to spend the entire day in the library. Even as she took down the most reliable atlas from the shelves, she considered what books or scrolls might aid this new branch of research.

* * *

><p>The sun was setting when Astren decided it was time to drag Hiccup out of the library. He could smell dinner wafting up from the kitchens, and if he knew Hiccup, she hadn't stopped to eat for lunch. A powerful shove from his shoulder, and Astren managed to swing the stiff doors open. The room inside was dimly lit, the brightest spot directly underneath a lit torch, which was secured in one of the holders well away from any flammable parchment. He still questioned the wisdom of open-flame torches as the only sources of light in a

room filled with paper.<p>

"Hiccup?" he called, stepping past a contently-dozing Toothless curled up on the floor. The dragon must have recognized his steps before the boy even entered the library, for he always assessed newcomers for any threat to his rider.

"Over here!" her voice called, muffled by a bookcase between them. He followed the sound, rounding the corner to find Hiccup replacing a couple of scrolls in the area designated for folktales and fables, one case over from the more often used maps. By the look of them, the scrolls she used were ancient.

>"Good day for your research?" he asked, walking over to her and then stooping, pressing a kiss to her lips. He felt her smile against him in response, pulling away before he was quite ready for the kiss to end.<p>

"Yes!" she exclaimed. Her eyes were alight, dancing with excitement even in the poor lighting. He supposed it was worth a shortened kiss to see the look on her face. Even now, it wasn't often her whole expression lit up with joy. Astren wanted to see that look more often, to put it there himself. He cleared his throat, which was oddly tight all of a sudden.

"Glad to hear it. C'mon, let's get dinner, you've been here all day. I'm gonna get jealous of those dusty old scrolls soon," he teased. Hiccup rolled her eyes, but went along as he took her hand and started tugging her out of the room.

"You're just lucky I'm done. I'd never part from my beloved scrolls," she bantered back, laughing as he stuck his tongue out at her. With all of her friends already past their coming-of-age, they'd become much more serious in the past year or so. Astren knew he had too, though his seventeenth birthday was several months back. He knew Hiccup has noticed his increased seriousness in the past months, and he could see it sadden her. She loved to be playful and carefree, perhaps because most of her young life had been so austere and cold. She often goofed around with Toothless, but it was nice for Astren to be playful with her again, even for a moment.

Astren dragged her over to eat with Ruff and Tuff and Snotlout as Toothless trailed lazily after them. He snuck glances at her face, still alight from a fruitful day in the library, as he ate. Fishlegs joined them a few minutes late, but with her arrival their group was complete, and they spent more than an hour eating, talking, and otherwise enjoying the company.

It was dark when he finally walked Hiccup home, Toothless a dark shape ahead of them. The dragon had already entered Stoick's house by the time they drew up to the porch, which Astren was grateful for. He enjoyed having Hiccup's full attention on himself.

"Thanks, Astren. I'll see you tomorrow," she smiled, her hands on his shoulders as she stood on tiptoe to kiss him. His hands quickly found her waist, pulling her close as their kiss grew long and lingering.

Finally, he pulled back, not wanting to risk Stoick opening the door. While the chief was fairly generous with giving them some privacy, he would (and had when they took too long giving good-night kisses)

open the door and stare menacingly at his daughter and her beau if they pushed it.

"Night, Hiccup," he whispered, lovingly smoothing an errant strand of hair from her face. Her skin was soft and warm to the touch, and he marveled at the texture of it beneath his roughened fingertips.

"Night," she smiled back, pressing one more quick kiss to his lips before she turned to go inside. She held his gaze as she shut the door, giving him one last almost-shy smile before it shut completely.

I can't wait for tomorrow, he thought as he walked back home.

* * *

><p>AN: **Done! Hope you guys enjoyed, and please drop me a review. As always, I love your feedback. Revel in it, even!

4. This Is It

A/N: hey guys! sorry, this took a week longer than I anticipated, but here's your update! I hope you enjoy!

* * *

><p>Chapter Four: This is It

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><p>Brave, end-of-winter birds chirped in the early morning light. The sun rose, a welcome sight in the cold late winter, although Hiccup lay blissfully unaware of this fact.<p>

The girl in question was fast asleep, completely shielded from the light. Toothless' wings formed a snug cocoon for her, as she lay nestled in the dragons paws. She often ended up like this when she had nightmares in the middle of the night. Normally, Toothless would sleep on her bed, over the blanket while she slept cozily underneath. But when she had nightmares and woke up in a cold sweat, she always cuddled close to Toothless, tucked against his warm underbelly with his limbs holding her securely, his wings protecting them both, just as he had done when he saved her life during their battle with the Green Death.

Of course, that very battle was usually the focus of her nightmares. The dreams still caused her horrible, phantom pains that burned her left leg, or what was left of it, and the day after she limped heavier than normal. Perhaps it was because she was so weak after the battle (and remained weak for many weeks afterward), or maybe it was just because she was always a frail child, but her body never fully adjusted to the prosthetic. She tried walking on it as much as she could initially, but it was always so painful. Even after fine tuning it over and over again throughout the past three years, she never got rid of the limp and pain. Gobber speculated it was because her body wasn't hearty enough, but speculation didn't change reality. Even now, she struggled to walk any significant distance without some sort of aid from Toothless. Astren and her father had served as

substitutes now and then, too.

And it was her father's voice that woke her up that morning.

"Hiccup!" he called, more cheerily than normal. Inside Toothless' wings, she stirred. Her auburn hair was a mess and half in her face, and she shifted to brush the sleep out of her eyes. The motion woke Toothless up, and the Night Fury shifted, grumbling.

The sound made Hiccup smile.

"C'mon, bud," she coaxed, tapping his wings from within. He gave another protest, but groggily opened his wings. Hiccup clambered out, scooting across her bed to where she placed her prosthetic on the floor last night. She strapped it on, then quickly changed from her nightgown into her favorite outfit of a long green tunic and darker leggings. With water from her basin and quick fingers, within moments Hiccup had untangled her hair and pulled on her sole boot.
>"Lets go, bud," she smiled at Toothless. "Dad's waiting, and it is my birthday."<p>

Hiccup limped down the stairs, Toothless by her side and ready to catch her all the way down. Stoick watched them from his seat at their lone table. There was a mix of sadness and joy in his eyes. As she carefully clambered down the stairs, she saw he still mourned the loss of her mother, wished Valhallarama could be with them to celebrate another birthday. She also clearly saw the guilt in his eyes, present every time he saw her limp on her prosthetic, for he knew he was partially to blame for crippling her. But there was great joy too. Stoick showed affection much more readily over the past three years than he had since his wife's death. Hiccup was grateful for the rebuilt bond with her father every day, lived for seeing the raw pride and care in his expression.

"Happy Birthday, Hiccup," he smiled at her, walking over and enveloping her in a hug. Even now, hugs were something of a rare commodity, so she hugged back, taking a moment to feel small and safe in her father's arms.

"Thanks, Dad." she smiled when she pulled back. "Another year older, I guess."

"Yer seventeen now. All grown up," he mused, and something in his tone was just the tiniest bit sad.

Hiccup frowned briefly, but before she could ask anything, her father presented her with a gift. It was a medium sized wooden box, made of rich red wood and intricately carved with rope designs. "it's yer mothers." he said with a wistful smile.

As Hiccup opened the box, Toothless leaned in over her shoulder, curious as well. Within, jewelry sparkled at her, from gold bracelets to necklaces with roughly cut green stones. Her jaw dropped.

"Dad, this..."

"Is yer mothers. Ye have the same coloring as her, so I never sold it. Wouldn't've anyways. Yer mother's ghost would've come back to haunt me," he chuckled, mirth trickling back into his face. "I

thought ye might like to have her things. It's all ornamental, of course, ain't a thing in that's practical, but I figured ye'd want it. Yer mother wore some of the fancier things when we got married," Stoick tripped over his words here and there. Hiccup smiled, touched. He wasn't good with emotional or sentimental things, but she could see he was making the effort. To be fair, neither of them were good, but they both tried.

"Thanks, Dad. It really means a lot to me," she said with a slightly awkward smile, uncomfortable and overwhelmed by the sentimentality of the gift. They rarely discussed Valhallarama.

"Well, good," he said gruffly, clearly embarrassed by all the emotion. Stoick cleared his throat. "Now go on, sleepy head, or you'll be late. Didn't you tell me you were meeting up with Astren for the day?"

"Oh, that's right!" Hiccup exclaimed. Only last night her boyfriend had reminded her to meet him in mid-morning. But of course, Val's things had driven all other thoughts from her mind. Including the gift she still had to ask for from her father, but she was already running late and didn't want to keep Astren waiting, so it could be put on hold till later, she supposed.

"I'll put this away in yer room. Ye go have fun," Stoick responded, rather indulgent. It was a little strange for him to offer such a thing; normally he would have left it on the table. But she could see a little extra moisture in his eyes, so she knew memories of her mother were stirring up more emotion than he had been anticipating. She smiled broadly at him, hoping to ease some of the sadness, but she swore it only made him look more forlorn. Strange.

Feeling rather awkward, Hiccup decided it was time to get a move on. Better to let Stoick sort this out on his own, apparently.

>"Thanks, Dad!" she called as she moved with Toothless to exit the house. Hastily, she grabbed Toothless' riding gear from the cubby by the door and strapped it on outside on their stoop. It wasn't that far a walk from her house to the other side of the village, but she didn't want to risk aggravating her leg, since she didn't know what Astren planned for the day. Better to save her leg.<p>

Once she was strapped in to the saddle, they leaped into the air. Flying with Toothless was the best - her leg hurt least up in the air, and it didn't matter that she was crippled. She and Toothless were flying, and no one could catch them if they chose to go fast, not even nearly three years after people first started riding dragons. In the sky, they were untouchable. Hiccup's heart soared at their ascent, a blissful smile crossing her face. Her hair whipped around in the wind and she let out a wordless shout of exhilaration.

The flight could not last long, though. They had reached the edge of the village, and down below, by the fringe of the forest, Astren was waiting. Working as one, Hiccup clicked the pedal just as Toothless arched downwards; they landed flawlessly.

"Hey," she greeted her boyfriend of almost three years with a warm smile.

"Happy Birthday, Hiccup," he smiled back. He was gorgeous, as always, but something in his smile seemed the slightest bit off. It didn't quite reach his eyes, and she wondered if he was anxious. Hiccup shrugged it off. Perhaps he'd had a rough morning. After all, Astren had been perfectly fine yesterday.

"Thanks," she returned as she moved to unclip herself from the saddle. Astren approached as she was occupied, and by the time she was free from her restraints, he stood alongside Toothless. As she swung her good leg over the saddle, preparing to slip to the ground, Astren instead reached up and lifted her down from the saddle. The gallant gesture made Hiccup blush.

"Thanks," she said again. Astren leaned down to give her a quick kiss.

"You're welcome," he smiled. "Ready?"

"What are we doing?"

"Well, it's your birthday, and I know you love to explore the forest, so I thought we'd do that."

Hiccup beamed, leaning in to peck her boyfriend on the lips. "I love you."

"Love you too," he grinned, smile finally reaching his eyes as he clasped her hand and they turned to the forest. Toothless began to walk after them, but Astren stopped him with a raised hand.

"Toothless, would you mind if I had her to myself for a little while today? I promise she'll be back by sunset, so that you can be with her on her birthday too," the boy offered. Toothless tilted his head curiously, but didn't look put out. Instead, he waited for Hiccup to speak up.

"It's alright, Toothless," she reassured with a smile. "Ill be fine." The dragon gave her his gummy grin, bumped her forehead gently with his snout, and then trotted off.

"Alright, where to?" she asked brightly, facing Astren once more. He held out his hand, and she took it as they wandered through the forest.<p>

* * *

><p>It was late afternoon, and the two teens were lounging in the light provided by the sinking sun. They sat by one of the many cliff faces that looked out over the ocean to the west. Hiccup grinned, thinking of the day spent together. There had been a picnic a few hours ago, and a snowball fight in one of the clearings as well. Now the two sat side by side, watching the horizon as the sun came close to setting. The silence was a peaceful one, and it was several more minutes before Astren stood up, offering Hiccup a hand. She took it, smiling gratefully, and they strode hand in hand along the cliffs. The rosy light made everything feel soft and warm despite the chill of the wind.<p>

She squeezed Astren's hand, beaming up at him. It was so nice to just _be_ with him, such a nice change from the bustle of their normal,

busy lives.

"This has been an amazing birthday, Astren," she spoke, voice low to match the serenity of the moment.

"I'm glad," he responded, pausing to dip his head and kiss her thoroughly. Hiccup felt her heart pick up pace as his lips moved against hers, clutching at his arms to keep her balance. Sweet storms, he was a good kisser. After a prolonged moment, he pulled back and grinned at her slightly dazed expression.

When Hiccup caught her breath enough to notice, she slapped him playfully. He just laughed, throwing his head back in delight. Hiccup grabbed him by the shirt, pulling him in sharply for another kiss and cutting his laughter short.

By the time they were able to part long enough to catch their breath (again), the bottom of the sun was just kissing the horizon.

"Oh, look! Winter must almost be over," Astren said suddenly. "You can see the gulls in the distance!"

Hiccup turned to look, squinting against the sun. "I don't see them."

When she turned back to her boyfriend, she stopped short. He knelt before her, took one of her hands in his own, and in his free hand something glinted in the slanted sunlight. A simple band of gold, just the right size to slip around her finger.

Hiccup's mouth dropped open.

"Hiccup," Astren started, and even though his voice was strong she could hear the hint of nervousness behind it. "I love you. I've actually wanted to ask you for a while now, but your father wanted me to wait till we were both of age. So...will you marry me? I cannot imagine living the rest of my life with anyone but you," he confessed, for once looking up at her instead of the other way around.

A thousand thoughts rushed through her brain at once - This was why both Astren and her dad were acting oddly earlier! She had no idea Astren was proposing!

Oh, skies above, he was proposing?!

She didn't know much about weddings! Where would they live? When would the date be? Did they need a house? Where would Toothless live? How would he deal with her getting married? Would he feel left out, abandoned, betrayed?

Oh gods, kids. She would be expected to have kids!

"I...I..." she stuttered, too stunned to speak. The suddenness of the proposal left her thunderstruck, and she swayed where she stood.

"Hiccup? Are you okay?" Astren asked with concern.

Hiccup closed her eyes. She needed a second to think.

Except maybe she didn't.

Maybe she knew after all.

Everything suddenly fell into place. She took a deep, steadying breath, and opened them again.

* * *

><p>AN: **okay, yes, I'm unkind. :D deal with it.

Some of you predicted it! Congrats! Now, I'm interested in what your predictions are now. Let me know what you think happens, and stay tuned for the next update.

Once again, please drop me a review, your feedback is my guidance for keeping the story on track!

5. A New Path

A/N: Sorry for the delay, guys! I was finishing up a hellish semester. But I'm on break now, so here's your promised update. I won't say anymore till the end of the chapters, so read on and enjoy my dears!

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><p>Chapter Five: A New Path

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><p>Her free hand reached towards the one Astren held the ring in. Carefully, softly, she used her own small hand to close Astren's larger one around the plain but beautiful ring he bore.<p>

He looked up at her with confusion and sudden nerves.

"I love you, Astren. So much. But I just...I can't. I'm not...I'm not ready."

"What?" he frowned, crestfallen.

"You're wonderful. I love you so much, and you...you deserve someone who's ready to be your wife. Someone who can give you everything you want, everything you need. I...I can't do that," she sighed. "I mean, there's still so much I want to do. I want to see other lands, I want to explore the world, I want to learn," she tried to explain.

"I wouldn't keep you from doing that," Astren protested.

"I know you wouldn't. But I...I can't be your wife when I know I can't give you what you need," Hiccup responded, smiling sadly. She could feel tears of regret starting to pool in her eyes. "I'm selfish, there's so much I want to do for myself before I marry. You shouldn't have to give up what you deserve. You should have someone who's going to be there for you always, someone who doesn't want to go off and adventure still. That's hardly...hardly fair to you." Her voice cracked.

"Hiccup..." Astren's voice was trembling, and Hiccup gasped on the first sob that escaped her throat, struggling to force back tears. This had to be finished properly, she owed him that much. And so much more, but she just couldn't. The village would hate her all over again for this, Astren was young and popular and attractive and everything a girl should want. But she couldn't get married. Just thinking of marriage made her panicky.

"I love you, Astren. I swear I do. I'm just not ready to be a wife, I'm too young," she clutched his hands, squeezing them, hoping he understood the sincerity of her words.

"Lots of women get married at seventeen, sometimes even younger," he countered, heartbreak written in the confused, contracted slope of his brows, the frown in his eyes.

Hiccup nodded her head, smiling sadly. "It's normal, even. But when have I ever fit normal?" she asked. "Please. I love you and I can't stand hurting you like this. I hate it. But I'd be hurting you worse if I said yes. I just...I'd hate myself, I know I can't give you what you deserve in a wife."

For once, Astren didn't try to mask his emotions. His eyes dropped to the ground, and he looked utterly defeated. Still, he didn't pull away from her, as if he couldn't stand to see her go. Tears finally broke loose, rolled down Hiccup's cheek as she leaned down to Astren, giving him one last, soft kiss.

"I-I'm-I'm so sorry. You deserve much, so much, more than I can give right now," she whispered, words feeling like they were choking her even as they tumbled from her throat. Hiccup pulled away. As she stepped back, Astren's hands fell from hers, and he knelt there motionless, eyes fixed on the frozen dirt. Hiccup turned, walking with her back to Astren and the sunset.

* * *

><p>Hiccup stumbled, falling to her elbows and knees in the slick, snowy undergrowth of the forest. The impact jarred her bad leg, wrenching her prosthetic against it's bonds. She let herself heave one more gasping sob, then pushed herself upright again. This was not the first time she'd fallen on the horrible, horrible trek back home.<p>

Tears clouded her vision as she limped through the forest, the pain in her heart temporarily overpowering the pain in her suddenly-much-more-tender leg. She stopped a ways further into the trees, not to nurse her aching leg, for she no longer felt it, but to sit on a fallen log and cry. To cry for the misery she'd caused Astren, to cry for the future they'd never have, to cry for the relationship that she'd just lost, to cry for the loss of her first love.

She knew their relationship wouldn't recover â€" at least, not within the foreseeable future. Astren had taken down all his defenses for her, and she'd crushed him. Furthermore, being proposed to had cemented her desire for how much else she wanted to do. She truly did want to see the world, to go far beyond anything a Viking had ever seen.

And she knew Toothless would be more than happy to go. They flew frequently, for neither of them could be truly happy if they were cut off from the sky for any real stretch of time. Yet, somehow it wasn't the same as flying to a new, faraway land. The past three years had been filled with short expeditions to nearby islands and Viking colonies. As the years progressed, they had to keep going farther and farther outside of Berk to see anything new. She couldn't keep Toothless trapped. He was a wanderer by nature " maybe right now he didn't feel trapped, but one day " maybe in a number of years " one day she'd be trapping him again, just like she got him stuck in the cove. It was time for them both to grow beyond Berk; she'd felt it building for quite some time, this latent restlessness. And now she was more aware of it than ever. Heartbreak did that to a girl, apparently.

Drying her tears, Hiccup pushed herself to her feet. She should go home, the sun was setting " she had to choke back a new wave of tears as the image of Astren, with the sun setting to the side of him, came unbidden to her mind.

She would feel pain over their break for a while. She knew when she said no that she wouldn't run off skipping and happy. But Hiccup was certain she was doing the right thing. She couldn't imagine getting married and having kids " most couples had a child within two or three years of marriage, if not sooner. And she couldn't imagine marrying Astren and then denying him a family. A family she knew he would want " did want. With her.

So she gulped heavily, swallowed the sobs and blinked back her tears, and limped heavily through the forest. Less than halfway home, though, searing pain began to shoot through her bad leg. The initial shock of breaking things off with Astren had dulled; and now the pain in her leg was back in full force. Hiccup tried to keep herself from crying out every step, but it wasn't working very well. The world spun, and she slumped to the cold ground, clutching her left leg.

The phantom feelings were back again, brought on by a full day's exertion. Hiccup cursed herself " almost three years later, and she still couldn't walk anything close to normal. Gobber had never had this much trouble adjusting to a prosthetic " she'd asked him many times.

Groaning in pain, she gingerly unstrapped the metal-and-wood contraption from her leg. The stump where her lower left leg ended was red with irritation, and she grit her teeth and she gently massaged the scar tissue.

"I'm going to be stuck out here all night, aren't I?" she moaned to herself. Sighing, she leaned back against the tree, tipping her head up until she could look at the sky through the bare branches. She blinked back a new wave of moisture in her eyes. Orange and red painted the sky, the sunset heading towards its finish. "Fantastic."

Several minutes later, she heard a rustling noise in the dead brush several feet away. Turning her head sharply, she faced the source of the noise. For two tense seconds, the ominous rustling continued. Then, Toothless burst through the frozen undergrowth. Hiccup cried a

little bit in relief, burying her face in her hands, shoulders stiff. After all the craziness of today, all she wanted to do was go home.

Toothless instantly recognized something was wrong. He scooted over, leaning his head down. Hiccup wrapped her arms around his neck, and he lifted her off the ground; it was a routine they were used to. He seemed to understand that her leg was too sore to fly (perhaps tipped off by the fact that she held her prosthetic in her hand, she would later realize), for he didn't even crouch to take off. Instead, he nudged her onto his back by wriggling and using his wings to buffet her into place. The moment she settled, he trotted at a brisk pace through the forest.

"Astren...Astren asked me to marry him today," she stuttered out, unable to bottle everything up inside. Toothless' ears perked back towards her, signaling that he was paying attention. "I said no."

_ That_ was enough to get Toothless to look over his shoulder at her curiously. Hiccup stared fixedly at the saddle. "I'm not ready. I know others get married at my age, younger even. But..." she trailed off, sighing. "I don't know. I don't want to settle down yet. There's so much else I want to see, and do, and I can't do that if I'm supposed to be a wife and clean and cook and...and have and look after kids!"

She heard Toothless croon curiously.

"Yeah. Kids," she replied to what she guessed his question was. "Viking wives usually have their first kid about a year or two after marriage. Which would have meant no flying for us. Pregnant women probably shouldn't fly at all, and they _definitely_ shouldn't try and do the stuff we like to do when we're flying. It could hurt the baby, and even the mother."

Toothless gave a concerned croon.

Hiccup shrugged. "But there's no point in speculating. I won't be having kids any time soon, if at all." she whispered, scratching her faithful companion on the back of the neck. "But I _hated_ doing this to Astren! He doesn't deserve it, but it would be so much worse to marry him when my heart's not in it. I want to fly around the world and _see_ _things!" she pounded her fist into her palm for emphasis, digging her nails into her palm to keep her voice from cracking. Already, it was painful to talk about Astren.

Toothless gave a croon, the vibrations in his throat comforting, as they emerged from the forest. Exhausted, Hiccup slumped against his neck, the warmth and strength of his presence giving her heart. All in all, it had been one of the worst days ever â€" the ending soured even the happiest moments of the day. The only worse days had been a few cold, rainy, brutal ones in her childhood â€" days when her father had been unintentionally harsh and her bullies gave her an especially good beating, and the day in the Kill Ring, when Toothless had been captured, her father had disowned her, and she watched both them sail off to certain doom.

As they approached the village in the fading light of the sunset and descending twilight, Hiccup ignored the curious looks of the villagers. Rarely did Toothless ever cover any significant distance

on the ground, usually only deigning to walk through the village when her leg acted up and Hiccup needed support to walk. Anything further, and they flew. So Hiccup buried her face against Toothless' scales, wishing for the privacy to mourn her broken heart and Astren's, and what could have been, if she were not so different, more normal.

Luckily, it was not long before Toothless nosed open the door to her home, and trotted in, Hiccup still clinging fast to his back. Stoick wasn't facing them, instead opting to watch the fire lazily.

"How was your day, Hiccup?" he asked. Now, realizing that he had known of Astren's plans for the day, she could hear the forced casualness of his voice.

"Terrible," she returned without pretense, still atop Toothless, hugging the dragon's neck for comfort.

Her father turned around, and the confusion on his face quickly switched to alarm.

"Hiccup?" he queried with sharp concern, noting that she had removed her prosthetic and that tear-streaks stained her cheeks. He reached out, expression clearly betraying the worry he held for his child's well-being. His worry for Hiccup was something he had not been able to hide since she lost her leg and almost died fighting the Green Death.

"I turned him down, Dad," she whispered hoarsely.

* * *

><p>AN:** Now let the fire and pitchforks begin. I know many of you won't be happy with the turn this chapter has taken, but it seemed right to me. Hiccup's not traditional, and seems like such an adventurer, a seeker of knowledge, to me that I couldn't imagine her settling down young. And Astren/Astrid is definitely the kind of person to want to settle down to a normal life, with a family. And right now, their visions of the future don't line up.

But will they line up in the future? That has yet to be seen. Hiccup could find someone else, Astren could find someone else, they both could, or neither of them could.

Now, as always, please leave me your feedback on this chapter. Even if you're upset with what I've done and think I'm mean and horrible for doing such a thing. :) I've been dying to see your reactions!

6. Things Which Cannot Be Delayed

A/N: First of all, I'm sorry for the delay. I meant to post weeks ago, but finals and project absolutely killed off anything that was not school related. I was taking five classes, and I ended up with four projects, four finals, and two final presentations. Jesus Christ, the last two and a half weeks of my life have been living hell. But! I'm back now, with a renewed interest in WSAAtC, so let the chapter proceed without further delay. Here, we see Hiccup and Stoick's altered relationship fleshed out in detail.

Enjoy, and as always, leave me your feedback in reviews and/or PM's.
Your input keeps me on track!

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><p>Chapter Six: Things Which Cannot be Delayed

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><p>To say Stoick was startled would be a vast understatement. Here was Hiccup, sitting sideways in the saddle she fashioned for her dragon, prosthetic removed, eyes red from crying at the end of what he thought would be one of the happier days of her life.<p>

Astren approached him several weeks ago, asking his permission to propose to Hiccup on the day of her coming-of-age. Stoick granted it. After all, he had no reason to refuse the boy, and he knew very well Hiccup would make her own decisions with or without his permission (although, Astren was more traditional, so Stoick figured it was important to the boy to get permission). Upon her seventeenth birthday, Hiccup was considered an adult in Viking society, and fully eligible to marry whomever she chose. Furthermore, Astren was everything Stoick could hope for in a husband for his only child. The boy was talented, strong, well-liked, capable, intelligent, and unquestionably in love with Hiccup. As a father, he should be thrilled Hiccup was getting such a desirable offer. And she seemed to love Astren. He'd thought, despite the fact that it made him uncomfortably and confusingly sad, that she would accept. So the current situation rather baffled him. Hiccup said she turned the boy down and looked to be on the verge of tears. He understood nothing of what was happening, but there were more pressing matters to attend to.

"Is your leg okay?" Stoick asked, ignoring his surprise for the moment to assure that, physically at least, she was as whole as could be.

"No, I walked too far on my own â€" after I turned Astren down â€" trying to get back. I couldn't stay there after that, Dad," she said, new tears puffing the skin around her eyes and wetting her face.

"How bad is your leg?" Stoick persisted as he approached, not to be deterred.

Hiccup responded with a look of confusion and almost anger, as if she could not understand why he was ignoring what she considered to be the bigger issue in this conversation. When her father held his ground and crossed his arms over his chest, she sighed.

"It's swollen and sore, and I'll probably be limping bad for a day or more, but nothing more than overuse," she replied, tone heavy with exasperation.

"Thank you," he said with all sincerity. "Now, tell me, what happened?"

So Hiccup relayed the story to Stoick, breaking out fiercer waves of tears as she recounted her refusal of Astren and her reasons for it.

He remained silent during and after the tale, watching her thoughtfully.

"Aren't you angry?! Or upset, or something?" she queried, his extended silence clearly upsetting her. Stoick blinked, still rather shell-shocked, and forced himself to start speaking for his daughter's sake.

"Well, I can't say I'm not surprised. I thought for sure ye would accept him, but then I was never very good at predicting what ye'll decide to do," he replied, "and no, I'm not angry, or upset, or disappointed. It shouldn't surprise me that ye decided to go against our norms. Ye never were very good at following them, anyway," he chuckled and gestured to the large Night Fury "who he would swear had grown several feet or more over the past three years" that currently stood in their house, Hiccup still resting on his back.

This drew a small, watery smile from her. Stoick returned the smile, stepping forward once more and lifting her up under her arms, effectively hoisting her off Toothless' back. He then set her on the ground, and allowed her to lean on him as she hobbled over to the lone set of table and benches by the hearth. Even at seventeen, she was barely more than just a slip of a girl "she had none of the muscle, sturdiness, or endurance of her more traditional Viking women counterparts. She was still short, scrawny, and weak. Still, the past three years had taught Stoick to finally be able to see past her physical shortcomings and appreciate what he'd failed to grasp before the Battle " her wit, her bravery, her determination, her cunning, and above all, her strength of spirit.

"And as fer yer reasons for refusing him...well, they're very good reasons. Ye were right " marrying him ta spare his feelings wouldn'ta been right. But ye mentioned wanting to see things when ye were explainin' the whole thing to me. What...what did ye mean by that?" he asked, all nerves and anxiety. He had a sneaking suspicion building, one he had been forcibly suppressing for months. He waited for confirmation of what he already expected, despite hoping against hope his hunch would be wrong.

He'd been dreading losing her to Astren, giving away his baby girl, watching her finish outgrowing him. Now, he suspected he was going to lose her to something else entirely.

"Dad. Um. That was actually something I wanted to talk to you about. I want...I want to explore. See the world. How can I know what I want from life when I've hardly seen anything beyond our little islands? It's more than just for me; Toothless too. He's not meant to be confined to an area, he's the very definition of a wanderer. We've already explored nearly everything within a day's flight. I can't keep him here, it'll ruin him eventually. And he can't go without me. And...and more than anything, I want to take this...this grand adventure." Hiccup blurted out in a rush. Her stomach was awash with nervous butterflies. "I was going to ask you about it, as a birthday present. I want your blessing to go and explore the world. _Please_. I'm of age now, and this is what I want to do with my life right now. I'll have Toothless with me, you know he'll always keep me safe. I'll never want for shelter or food with him. _Please_, dad. I want to figure out what I'm meant to do."

Stoick was very quiet for a moment.

"Do ye not think yer meant to lead yer people, Hiccup?" he finally asked in a rueful rasp.

Hiccup winced. Here were all of Stoick's dreams for her, long ago shattered and then rebuilt after she saved the village. Hopes that she would lead their people, follow in the footsteps of her father, and his father, and his grandmother, and his great-grandfather, and on back through their chain of ancestors. Seven generations worth of ancestors in fact.

"Dad, I've been thinking..." she started, hesitantly. "I don't know if I ever want to be chief. I don't think I'd make a very good one. Oh, sure," she cut him off as he started to protest. "I have the smarts to make a good chief. But our people need more than that. They need someone who can meld the old ways with the new, one of their own who can lead them forward and make this new life their own. And that's not me â€" I've never been one of their own, not really. I'm too different, I think too differently. It used to be a bad kind of different, and now it's good, but it's still there."

"They'd follow ye wherever ye led them, Hiccup, ye have to know that," Stoick offered desperately.

"Maybe I'd always have their loyalty, but I'd never make them truly happy. I'd always be pushing them too far out of their comfort zone, too far too fast and even though they might tolerate it, it would make them miserable."

Stoick's shoulders sagged underneath the truth of her words. He wondered if this knowledge had been there all along, buried under his hopes for her and more recent desire to never give up faith in her. The fact remained; if Hiccup were to lead, she would try to reign her genius for ingenuity and creativity and newness in, but would never succeed entirely. And the people of Berk needed some of the old times too â€" traditions that would reassure them their world wasn't entirely upside down. Over the past years they had adapted to living alongside dragons extraordinarily well, but some old traditions, most notably the midsummer and midwinter feasts and festivals had been attended to with more vigor than she could remember. They needed old with the new â€" and Hiccup wasn't much for the old ways, always creating her own, entirely new path.

"Yer right," Stoick sighed, resting his elbows on his knees. His shoulders were rounded and slumped, head hung low in unhappy resignation. "And as much as it pains me to say this, ye're right about yerself too. Ye need to see the world, ye'd never be happy cooped up in one place too long â€" at least for now. Ye said so yerself, ye've explored almost all the land within a day's flight by now."

He sighed again, heavily, and continued. "I'm going to miss ye terribly, Hiccup, ye out there in the big wide world and me with no way of protecting or looking after ye. Or even knowing if yer alright. I don't want to give ye up. There's nothing I want more than fer ye to stay," he croaked. "But I can't keep ye here, not when yer heart longs fer something more. Maybe one day yer wanderlust will settle, and ye'll stay here again â€" at least for a time. Just promise me one thing," he said earnestly, shifting stance and holding

tightly to both of his daughter's too-small hands.

"What?" Hiccup asked. She struggled to keep her voice steady, both pained by her father's obvious anguish and overwhelmingly hopeful to hear him grant his blessing for her journey.

"Promise me ye'll be careful. And ye'll visit when ye can," he begged, his gray-green eyes searching her much greener eyes imploringly.

"I'll do my best. I love you, Dad," she smiled, hugging him as fiercely as her weak limbs would allow.

"That's my girl," Stoick nearly sobbed, and kissed the top of her head. He enveloped her tiny form in his arms, holding her close to his chest. Oh, how he wished he could protect her forever, his precious daughter, his best gift ever. How was it more than a decade ago that she was a bright, shining little toddler, all smiles and words too big for her age and eyes that nearly glowed with an intelligence he already couldn't understand? And now his little girl had become a strong, independent woman, and quite the piece of work. He wished good luck to any man who might ever attempt to figure her out.

Honestly, a tiny part of him was glad she turned Astren down. No one would ever be quite good enough for Hiccup. Certainly not a boy just become a man, even if he was the most eligible young man in Berk. It would take more than that to captivate the interest of his daughter, and all that she had become; dragon-tamer, village savior, brilliant blacksmith-inventor-mechanic, sarcastic sasspot, and most of all, undeniably her own person.

And though his heart was breaking, because he finally had to let go of the future he'd always hoped for her, and he knew soon he was going to send his only child off into the unknown, to lands he had never seen and couldn't imagine, he smiled through the moisture in his eyes and held onto Hiccup tighter, for he couldn't be more proud of who she had become.

* * *

><p>AN:** Whoo, sappy overload. And I hope their relationship is believable here; I think all along, Stoick was motivated by the need to protect Hiccup. My own thoughts are that Hiccup was probably born small and sickly, perhaps a premature birth (back then a baby could be very much affected by a premature birth), and followed that trend of being small and prone to illness from then on. At least, in the movie Stoick seemed very much motivated by the need to protect Hiccup. I think finally having to let Hiccup go would cause him to get uncharacteristically emotional, and that's what I wanted to show here. I wanted to show that though their relationship is no where near perfect(ie Hiccup still holding back, slow to express her own wants, Stoick still wants/pressures her into doing what he envisions for her), it is most definitely healing from what it once was.

So, yes, sappy, but I think the sap is justified. And long overdue. Now, the story is going to really start getting into it, so stay tuned! I'll try to post again within a few weeks, and it _definitely_ won't be nearly 2 months again. Sorry for that, but I promise I'm back.

Please review and/or PM me with your feedback! It's super important in keeping the story moving, and I love getting reviews.

7. Shifting Tides

****A/N:**** I'm so so so sorry guys. I promised to update on time...aaaand I failed. But here's another chapter! I promise I'm trying, school just kinda hit me like a sledgehammer. Enjoy the following chapter, and I'll update ASAP, promise.

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><p>Chapter Seven: Shifting Tides

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><p>Just shy of two weeks later, Hiccup was itching to leave Berk. Since her horrible birthday, everything had changed. It almost felt like she was living her old life again. Half of her friends refused to speak to her after rejecting Astren, and since gossip spread like wildfire, most of the village was aware of the debacle. Astren was very well-liked among the villagers, and as a result a substantial portion of the townspeople treated her with a chilly manner these days.<p>

Of course, it was no where near as bad as before she saved the village, but it was enough to make her angry and uncomfortable. Furthermore, trying to avoid Astren was excruciating. She'd run into him by accident twice, and both times they'd both frozen on the spot. Hiccup saw the buried hurt resurface on his face as Astren looked at her, and each time he turned tail and ran before she could so much as open her mouth. Her heart stuttered, and the horrible sensation of building tears pricked her eyes.

Quite honestly, Hiccup was sick of all the tumult and discomfort. She knew it would be awful between her and Astren after she turned him down, but she never expected this kind of response from the villagers. It made her queasy, dredging up terrible memories from her childhood, and she was dying to leave. Ever since her birthday, she'd been preparing to leave.

Luckily, the preparations for her upcoming journey kept her so busy she didn't have much spare time to dwell on the sudden shift from her people. She had Toothless' saddle to re-build from scratch; she wanted something as new and un-worn as possible, for she didn't know when she would next have access to leather and a good smithy. She'd already fitted it â€" it was snug, and she took care when making it, double-stitching everything for extra strength.

Just last night, she finished redesigning and rebuilding Toothless' prosthetic tailfin and the controlling gears. She made major, ingenious new improvement. In addition to building a new tailfin from scratch, she'd devised a clip that would use a system of gears to keep the tailfin open even without her there to operate the foot-pedal.

Of course, it wasn't and would never be a perfect solution to the loss of Toothless' fin. With just the clip in place, Toothless would

(probably, she hadn't actually gotten to test it yet) be unable to do any complex maneuvers, and it would be much more tiring than if they flew together. But, it should restore basic solo flight to the Fury. Hiccup was thrilled. Toothless was no longer grounded without her in the saddle. It wasn't much, but it was a step forward. Furthermore, if there was ever an emergency, he would be able to fly without her.

But the best part of it, Hiccup thought with a smile as she tested clipping some specially designed aerodynamic saddlebags to the new saddle, adjusting the hooks with nearby smithy tools, would be the sheer sense of joy emanating from Toothless after the clip worked the first time. He would be free to take to the skies anytime he wished. She couldn't wait to show him the new adjustment. She just had to retrieve him from his napping spot on her father's porch and they could give the fin a test flight in their old cove later that morning.

Saddlebags adjusted, she removed them from the saddle and took all of her gear into her back room of the smithy, leaving the fin out. Moments later, she burst back into the main body of the building, snatched up the new prosthetic, and darted out of the building. She pulled the hood of her mantle, which she'd thrown over her bearskin cloak, up against the cold late winter air. Despite the chill, her grin grew bigger and bigger as she ran down the streets of Berk.

That smile got wiped off her face just over halfway home. She was jogging down one of the side streets she rarely ventured down, a street (if she remembered correctly) the younger vikings had used to build their own new houses. She believed Fishlegs had built her home here several months back, as had Snotlout. There were still some empty spots, as well as some houses under construction, and she slowed, trying to remember which of the completed houses belonged to Fishlegs.

"...Still a good house, mate," Snotlout's voice reached her ears. Hiccup kept her back turned; with the hood on, there was a good chance he might not recognize her from behind with her hood up and her long cloak covering her prosthetic. She really, really didn't want to interact with her cousin right now. Out of all her friends, he'd become the most hostile after she rejected Astren. The fact he thought that they were both contenders to succeed Stoick as chief didn't help matters. Hiccup still hadn't told anyone besides her father and Gobber about her imminent departure from Berk. She had quite enough animosity to deal with without her people thinking she was abandoning them, thanks.

"You should keep working on it. You'll have your own place when it's done, and when you find someone else it'll be ready to go," Snot continued, his voice drawing nearer.

"I know, I know," a quieter voice replied, freezing Hiccup in panic. _Not again. _It was Astren, and suddenly she understood everything: why he'd been so busy but quiet about the reason for his busyness before the proposal. He was building a _home_. A home that he'd expected them to share and build a family in. She suddenly felt queasy; she still thought she made the right choice in refusing his proposal, but damn if she didn't regret like Hel all the pain she caused both of them. "It's just..."

In her panic not to be noticed, feeling very much like an intruder, Hiccup's grip on the new tailfin faltered, and it slipped out of her grasp. She lunged to catch it before it clattered to the ground " anything to avoid drawing attention. Naturally, it all went wrong. The ground was slippery with melting, slushy snow, and between the poor traction her prosthetic had in these conditions and her eternal lack of coordination, Hiccup went toppling with the prosthetic. Together, they created a scene that drew plenty of attention.

"Hiccup?" Snotlout's voice came, incredulous and with an edge of anger to it. Sprawled sideways on the ground, Hiccup shook her hood out of her face and gingerly stood up, stooping momentarily to scoop up Toothless' fin. She held it in both of her arms as she turned to face her cousin and her former boyfriend, cradling the contraption to her chest like it was a cross between a pillow and a shield.

"Um. Hi." she grimaced, grip tightening on the tailfin. She knew Snotlout would not bully her like he used to; they'd become friends over the past few years. But his hostility was apparent enough to make her cringe, dredging up old instincts.

"What are you doing here?" he asked belligerently, nostrils flaring .

"It's a street, Snot," Astren cut in. "She can take whatever path she likes."

"But she was just gawking at this street. Clearly-"

"Stop it, Snotlout," Hiccup cut him off. "I was not here to do anything, I was just going home."

The boy huffed, but said no more. Timidly, she switched her gaze from him to Astren. She met his eyes, but unlike their last encounters, he did not immediately turn away from her.

"Hi," he greeted, unable or unwilling to mask the heartbreak that slipped across his face as he looked at her.

"Hello," she returned quietly.

"Um. Is that, um. Is that a new fin for Toothless? Didn't you make one a few months ago?" Astren asked, his voice a little strained. "He's not hurt?"

"He's fine," she said with a little smile. It was nice to see that Astren was done giving her the silent treatment. "This one is stronger and has a few new adjustments. I wanted to be prepared for the journey, since I don't know how long we'll be gone," she responded. A moment later, she had to resist the urge to clap both hands over her mouth. She hadn't meant for him to find out this way. Astren suddenly looked like he'd been punched in the stomach; even Snotlout took a step backwards in surprise.

"You're " you're leaving?" Astren choked out, face suddenly pale.

Hiccup cringed, cursing herself internally. "I...yeah. I'm leaving

Berk."

"Where? Where will you go?" he asked, utterly stricken. Hiccup's heart clenched. She hadn't meant to cause him more pain, but he did at least deserve to know.

"Anywhere. I can't keep Toothless in one place, and I want to see more of the world. I'm sorry, I didn't know how to tell you, or if I even should," she blurted.

"How can you just leave?! You're running away from all the problems you caused when you led him on!" Snotlout shouted, anger clearly bubbling over.

"Snotlout, this is not a conversation that includes you," Hiccup snapped back, losing her patience. She was beyond sick and tired of dealing with his belligerence. "I did not lead him on. I loved him and I still do, but I am not ready to marry. And I am not running away. So kindly butt out. You can support your friend, but that doesn't give you free reign to attack me," she snarled, clenching her fists. "Also, in case you hadn't figured it out, this means I'm not in line to be chief anymore. Back. Off."

Snotlout's mouth closed with an audible click. His eyes were still wide, and were it not for the sudden renewed tension between her and Astren, she would have laughed at the sight. As things were, she had bigger problems to deal with, so she turned back to face Astren and took a deep breath.

"Astren, please, I'm sorry if I made things worse by keeping it from you. I just. I didn't know how, or if I should tell you," she pleaded, gesturing helplessly.

"Uh. Yeah. I'll, uh, I'll see you later Snot," Astren sighed heavily, voice still not right. Snotlout turned to gape at the blond boy, but even for him there was no ignoring that clear dismissal. He slunk away quietly, leaving Hiccup facing a newly-heartbroken Astren.

"Why?" he asked, voice breaking. Hiccup swallowed thickly. Watching strong, fearless Astren turn this hurt and vulnerable broke her heart. She never meant to cause so much pain in following her own plans.

"I told you. It's what I need, it's what I want to do. I'm sorry, Astren," she said, clutching the tailfin closer to her chest. Astren caught the movement, and his face sunk further.

"Yeah. Goodbye, Hiccup," he choked out, and then turned from her, heading back into his almost-finished new house. Hiccup watched him retreat for a few seconds, before she too turned tail and ran.

* * *

><p>She arrived at her own home red-faced and out of breath with exertion. The run hadn't helped to ease the tension leftover from her recent encounter, so she stomped unhappily up the stairs of her porch, tailfin tucked under one arm. That had not been as uneventful a trip home as she'd hoped. Her good mood from before was ruined, and she was more impatient to leave than ever.

A sudden croon interrupted her black cloud of thoughts. Hiccup looked up, and a wash of warm air rushed across her face. Toothless' nose was inches from her, and immediately some of her anxiety eased away. _I'll always have Toothless._

"Hey, bud," she smiled, hefting the fin so that one hand was free to reach up and scratch his snout. He nuzzled into her hand, a low purr emanating from his throat. "I have a present for you. Wanna take a trip to the cove with me?" she asked. Toothless started bounding about the porch in enthusiasm, coming to rest only to affectionately bump her forehead with his snout. She grinned a bit, mood lightening further. "Alright, alright you overgrown lizard, let's get a move on."

* * *

><p>A short flight later, and Hiccup dismounted from Toothless' back. She placed the new fin off to the side, and then began undoing the straps on Toothless' saddle. "Trust me, bud," she urged. "I promise there's a reason."<p>

Toothless gave a warble, but complied, holding still as she removed the final buckle and slid the saddle from his back. Hiccup then moved to his tail, gently releasing the the prosthetic from his maimed fin. He looked curiously over his shoulder, but otherwise the dragon stayed still and cooperative. Hiccup retrieved the new fin, strapping it on and then arranging the gears so that it was fully open. Next came the clip; with only a moment or two of lining everything up, it fell perfectly in place. She tested its grip twice before deciding it looked secure.

"Alright Buddy," she said, backing up. "I made you a new fin, but this one is the best one yet," she swallowed, suddenly nervous. She was giving him back his ability to fly on his own. Before, she was excited, but now that she was face to face with the moment, doubt seeped in. What if she was only the thing that let him fly? What if that's all he thought of her? Would Toothless leave her behind, trap her here, now that he no longer needed her to fly?

No, no, of course not, Hiccup shook her head. Still, her hands trembled as she spoke up.

"This fin...I can clip it so that it stays open. You can fly on your own again, Toothless. You don't need me to fly anymore," she smiled through her nerves, heart in her throat. He looked curiously at her, then at his tail. He raised it, staring raptly at his new prosthetic, which stayed completely open as he waved it about. "It's not perfect. But it should work. You're totally free."

He stared back at her, pupils narrowing to slits. Then, in one mighty bound, he flung himself into the air. Hiccup stared up at the Night Fury as he ascended into the sky, and the weight of being left on the ground settled firmly over her.

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><p>AN:** and that's the chapter! Thank you for sticking with me, you guys! I hope in the future I can stick to the update schedule. Anyway, let me know what you thought of this chapter, and

any other feedback you may have. I always love it when you take the time to tell me what you think!

Until next time, which will (hopefully) not be horribly horribly late!

8. Forever

****A/N:**** Hey guys, I'm so sorry for the long wait. School swamped me, and I just couldn't keep up. Here's my very late update, and I hope you guys enjoy!

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><p>Chapter Eight: Forever

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><p>Hiccup stared up at the empty sky, and shivered. Toothless had left her. Surely he would come back. Surely. She had to be more than just an accessory to flight to him. She had to. He'd put his own life at risk so many times to save her. He'd comforted her during her nightmares, he helped her walk when her leg got sore. He wouldn't just leave. Not forever. Maybe he just needed some long-overdue flight time to himself. He'd be back. It was Toothless, after all. Not her often-fickle peers, not the villagers whose loyalty could be lost with a rejected proposal.

Stop it, Hiccup, she scolded herself. He'll come back for you.

—

And yet, despite the fact that she was well bundled up against the weather, she couldn't stop shivering, or the horrifying, creeping feeling of abandonment. He hasn't abandoned you. He'll come back for you eventually, she repeated over and over. She worried the grass as she waited, the cove still and silent and cold.

And then a sudden gust of cold air startled her. She leaped to her feet and whirled about, eyes wide, to come face-to-face with an ecstatic Toothless. His flight couldn't have taken more than three minutes, and Hiccup felt silly for worrying. The dragon lunged at her, and girl and Fury went tumbling head over heels. As always, Toothless was gentle, careful to avoid crushing her as they went sprawling. They ended up with Toothless on his back, Hiccup sprawled gracelessly across his belly, and the dragon promptly began licking the crown of her head in affection. Hiccup burst out laughing despite her shrieks of, "Ew, ew!"

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><p>YOU ARE THE CLEVEREST, MOST WONDERFUL CREATURE IN ALL THE SKIES, Toothless proclaimed with joy, whuffing affectionately at the top of Hiccup's head. She was still laughing, trying to flatten out her tufts of hair from the dragon saliva settled in her hair. It made them stand on end. YOU ARE BY FAR THE MOST INCREDIBLE CREATURE TO EVER EXIST, he roared in further praise, wrapping his wings around them both and cradling the small girl close to his chest as he wriggled about on the grass happily. Suddenly, he released her and jumped to his feet, leaving his human blinking up at him in surprise

from a heap on the ground.

_I'M TAKING YOU FLYING, _Toothless exclaimed, nearly dancing circles around her as Hiccup clambered upright once more. She stared at him curiously, not fully understanding his intent. Impatient to share this new breed of flight with her, Toothless used his back legs to launch them into the air as his forepaws scooped Hiccup up in the same instant. His front legs cradled her to form a sort of seat while his wings pumped them into the air. She squeaked, spindly arms clutching at his forepaws to steady herself.

_Silly girl. As if I'd ever let you fall. _Toothless scoffed, his tone heavily covered with affection. His Hiccup was always endearing, especially after she'd made such an enormous breakthrough for him, for them both. Either she understood his tone or trusted him utterly " perhaps both " because within moments of their sudden takeoff, Hiccup relaxed. She dropped her grip on one of his paws, and loosened her grip on the other.

"This is incredible!" she shouted over the whistle of the wind. Toothless tucked his head, and met with the sight of Hiccup beaming at him, sitting in the cradle of his paws with one arm swooping about in the air currents. She looked as exhilarated as he felt, and Toothless gave a loud, joyous roar. He pulled them into a mighty bank, curving swiftly around in the air. The turn was more cumbersome than it was when Hiccup worked in sync with him to fly, true, but it was all his own flight.

Still, the joyride was strangely unsatisfying. His back felt empty, too-light; flying purely under his own power was thrilling, but the initial joy faded fast.

Toothless realized he missed flying _with_ Hiccup. He'd gotten so used to it over the past years, _not_ having her in the saddle with their minds working together felt like he was missing a piece of himself. Nevermind that he currently held Hiccup in his forepaws, it just wasn't the same. He was hollow without her working with him to fly, he wanted her to fly with him, even if he didn't strictly need her anymore.

Sure, the new fin was practical besides being an amazing demonstration of his Hiccup's genius and determination. It would prevent him getting stuck if they were ever separated, gave him the ability to fly on his own, which could be critical in an emergency. He wouldn't have to worry about _if_ or _how_, _should_ Hiccup ever need rescuing (and knowing his human, she likely would. The girl had a knack for attracting trouble. And being reckless when meeting new dragons, she was so eager to befriend them). That alone made him breathe a touch easier. But on the whole, he desperately wanted to restore their symbiotic flight, the Fury decided as he swooped back into the cove, flapping his wings in a few powerful strokes until he was at a standstill. His hind legs touched the cold winter ground first, and he gently sat on his haunches. Toothless carefully set the Hiccup on the ground, his forepaws releasing her frame.

Hiccup turned to beam at him as he lowered to all fours, rustling his wings contently and then folding them up against his scales once more. "You liked it, then?" she asked, reaching out to scratch his snout. Though he did enjoy her nimble fingers rubbing away the occasional itch, Toothless danced out of reach.

"Bud?" she called after him, confused. Rightly so, for he almost never declined a good scratching. But right now, he had more important matters to attend to.

The large black dragon trotted over to where Hiccup had discarded their saddle earlier. He used his snout to nose it towards her, whining in the most pitiful way he could imagine. Sometimes, particularities were a challenge to get across without words, and he wanted to be crystal clear on this message.

Hiccup stared down at the saddle in bafflement.

"Toothless, buddy, you don't need that anymore. I don't have to ride with you for you to fly," she insisted, a hint of sadness breaking through her expression.

Toothless huffed impatiently. _Yes, I got that bit, silly human. I don't care. I don't want to fly without you_. He nudged the saddle forward again.

"Bud, I don't understand," she shook her head in confusion. His tail lashed back and forth angrily, gave a short bark of a roar to express his displeasure. She blinked, utterly lost.

Why is it so hard to understand? Flying isn't worth much without you, Hiccup, he crooned, pleading. Why didn't she understand? He huffed again, then went for a last resort. He lowered his head, trying (extremely unsuccessfully, it should be noted) to worm his way into the saddle without any assistance.

Hiccup's eyes finally lit up with understanding, and she looked utterly flabbergasted.

"You still want to use the saddle?" she asked, voice strained. "Fly together? With me?"

I want nothing more, Toothless nodded, giving her his best gummy grin. Hiccup stared at him as if she couldn't believe it. _I'm happiest flying with you, you annoying little scaleless ball of human. _

She flung herself at him, arms wrapped tight around his neck. Toothless ducked his chin over her thin shoulders, straining a wing to wrap around the scrawny human frame as he returned the embrace.

"Thank you, Toothless," she breathed. "This is...this is the best gift I could ever ask for, you still wanting to work together to fly. And here I thought I'd be giving you the gift."

Toothless warbled a laugh and released her. Hiccup drew back, wiping her eyes hastily with the back of her hand and laughing herself.

"How about this. We fly together, and whenever we stop I'll put the clip in place. That way if anything happens, you'll still be able to fly. That good with you?" she asked, scratching at the scales around his jaw. Toothless purred at the sensation, giving a short roar of approval.

It's a plan, little one. Now, don't we have an adventure to begin?

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><p>Hiccup's heart was singing, beating wildly as she and Toothless powered through the clouds, cutting through the sky in a near-vertical path. The flight she spent clutching Toothless' front legs had been a thrill of it's own, but this, sitting in the saddle and working as one with Toothless to soar through the air, this was home. She made no attempt to disguise her excitement that he still wanted her in the saddle, and she'd already whooped and screamed herself mostly hoarse.

Even though the air grew colder and colder as they continued to ascend, Hiccup couldn't be bothered to care. The past two hours had been nothing but one continuous joyride for her and Toothless, the two of them working together to pull their best acrobatic stunts. Her veins were thrumming with life and elation, doing wonders to fight off the end-of-winter chill.

And hey, the stinging wind on her cheeks only made her feel more alive.

A slight change in the tilt of her dragon's head signaled a change in tail position, and without even thinking, she clicked her foot pedals accordingly. The switch brought their climb to a curving halt, and as Hiccup leaned close to Toothless' scales they swooped up and over an invisible bar, then continued the loop until they were pointed straight at the ground far, far below. Toothless half-furled his wings, and with a click of the pedal on Hiccup's part, they rocketed towards the ground.

Hiccup squinted against the rush of air that screamed in her ears, chest flat against Toothless' scales to let the air go by easier. Adrenaline flooded her bloodstream as they gathered speed, already far beyond a speed any other dragon on Berk could hope to match and only halfway down. Toothless let out a great roar, clearly feeling the wonderful rush as well.

Thankfully, he'd stopped shooting off his blue fireballs after such roars of approval long ago, or Hiccup's hair would be singed all over again.

The craggy cliffs of the coast grew rapidly larger, but still the two held their positions. Then, at the last possible moment, Toothless flared his wings and Hiccup shifted the pedal. Instead of smashing headlong into the cliffs, they swerved, pulling out of the steep dive to soar easily alongside the cliff faces. Their dive gave the pair extra speed, and Hiccup gave another whoop of excitement, ignoring the face that her voice cracked as she did so.

The wind howled in her ears as Toothless darted in and out amongst the sea stacks scattered by the coast of Berk. The ends of her hair stung her face, lashing about wildly under the currents of air, and Hiccup made a mental note that brushing her hair would be critical later that evening. She didn't have long to be distracted, and Toothless swerved into a particularly intricate maze of sea stacks. Then they were dipping and swerving around the giant wind-worn stone,

and her attention was fully diverted. Toothless pulled them close enough to the stone for Hiccup to hear the stacks whistle by and feel the vortices of air that swirled about their faces. Two corkscrews and one alarmingly sharp bank later, they were free of the sea stacks, soaring easily above open ocean. Hiccup clicked her pedals, and Toothless followed, arcing in a great twisting loop. They leveled out, Toothless' wings catching a sea breeze to bring them smoothly back to the coastline.

Five minutes later, they were back in the cove. Hiccup double-checked to make sure she didn't leave anything behind. Given the success of the tail clip, and the fact that all of Toothless' gear was freshly made and tested, she wanted their grand adventure to begin. They were ready. She wrapped up the last of the free gear and swung herself into the saddle behind the bundle. One fluid movement clipped her harness into the saddle; although she almost definitely wouldn't need it for the short flight home, since the Death she'd made a habit of making sure she was secure in the saddle. There were always circumstances she couldn't prepare for, but she'd be damned if she would ever fall out of the saddle by a simple mistake.

Straightening, Hiccup surveyed the cove. Though it was mostly barren, the snow largely melted and little plant growth left from the harsh winter weather, a sharp pang of loss suddenly struck her. This cove, sometimes more so than her father's house, was home. This was where she bonded with Toothless, this was where they began. Furthermore, it was a safe haven. Whenever life in Berk got stressful or overwhelming, she and Toothless came back here. Back in October, just when it was starting to get cold, she'd had a fight with Stoick. Sensing her distress, for although fights between them were infrequent now, squabbling with her father brought back a whole host of bad memories and childhood issues, Toothless brought her out to the cove. The vibrant colors of late fall made their cove look magical, and a few hours splashing with her dragon in the slanted autumn sunshine did much to improve her mood.

While she was anxious to begin exploring, she couldn't deny she would miss the cove. Miss it desperately, in fact. She expected that eventually she'd miss her childhood home, even the village at large, but it was the thought of parting from this retreat, special to her and her dragon, that struck her most at the moment.

"Alright, Buddy," she sighed finally, taking one last long look. Toothless seemed to feel the same, for he gave a soft sorrowful croon as he too surveyed their cove. "Let's go back. Our adventure begins tomorrow."

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><p>AN:** And there it is. You didn't think I'd let Toothless abandon Hiccup, did you? He wouldn't, even if I wanted to make that happen. Review and fav, it keeps me going!

Also, I have a special announcement I'm going to make when I post chapter nine, so stay tuned!

****A/N:**** I'm sorry for the delay guys! My internship this summer kind of sucked up all my time. Here's the next chapter, it's not my favorite ever, but it's what I have. Enjoy!

Also, I don't know how long it'll be before the next update, sorry!

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><p>Chapter Nine: Departure

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><p>It was just after dawn, and Stoick's heart sat heavy in his massive chest. He watched, oddly frozen in place, as Hiccup double-checked every last piece of gear. Her hands tested every strap, buckle, and tie in preparation for her journey. She was entirely absorbed in her task, despite the ever-growing crowd of villagers surrounding the chief, his daughter, and her dragon.<p>

The assembly of Vikings stood a ways back from the edge of a cliff on the outskirts of Berk, forming a semicircle around Hiccup and Toothless, the open side facing the cliff face. Early morning light scattered long shadows across the beginnings of a spring grass, the snow now fully melted. The villagers were remarkably quiet, given that they were a crowd of Vikings. Perhaps they felt the weight of their hero taking off on her next adventure, leaving them all behind. Stoick thought he could hear a child or two sniffing in the background; Hiccup and her dragon had become astoundingly popular among the young children of Berk and would be sorely missed. The vast majority of the town would miss her, the sudden news of her immediate departure overwhelming whatever misgivings the villagers had about her rejection of Astren.

But Stoick would miss her more than words could say. As he watched her, attention devoted to absorbing every last detail of his daughter, he couldn't help but remember her younger years. How was it more than seventeen years ago that Val gave birth to a tiny, premature, sickly little girl? Even now, Stoick remembered that night as clearly as anything. He'd hoped for a strong, fat child; something that would easily survive its first harsh winter. He'd admit, he'd also secretly wanted a boy, if only because he thought he'd struggle more to raise a girl. But as long as the infant was hearty, healthy, and grew into a great warrior, he'd be overjoyed.

Then Val had gone into labor more than a month early. He was panicked; everyone knew a week or two early lowered the child's chances of survival, what would a month do? Furthermore, it was dangerous for Val. Too many trying hours later, the midwife called him in and Val placed a far-too-small bundle in his arms.

"It's a girl," she said, forcing her voice to be strong despite the tears streaming down her face. Stoick looked at the bundle, and experienced the most stunning range of emotions he'd ever had. In the middle of a swath of blankets, a teeny little red face was visible. A tiny tuft of reddish hair sat atop the little head, and the baby's eyes were scrunched closed. Even newborn, Stoick recognized the rounded tip of the child's nose; it was his. Joy rushed through him at this recognition, even as his heart splintered. The nose wasn't

the only thing he recognized about the baby. She was small, too small, even for a newborn. He could just hear faint, rasping gasps as she struggled for air. Horrified, he looked up from his daughter to meet Val's eyes. Her expression, angry and heartbroken, confirmed what he feared. The baby wouldn't make it through the night. She was too small, too early, and her lungs were too weak.

He felt a surge of anger at the world. How could the gods be so cruel as to bring this little girl into the world a month early, rob her of her chance at life? He'd never felt so protective of anything in his entire life as he did towards this doomed infant, and the horrible irony was that there was nothing he could do to save her.

He settled on the bed, sitting beside Val. She turned into his side, and burst into horrible sobs that yanked at his already shattered heart. Exhausted from hours of labor, her muscles were trembling, and it was all she could do to hold on to Stoick as she cried. He wrapped one arm around his distraught wife, pulling her close, while the other cradled the little bundle that was his newborn daughter. How long did he have left with her? Minutes? Hours?

He stared down at the baby's face, his other hand absent-mindedly stroking his wife's back until she fell into an exhausted, fitful sleep. As he watched the slow, labored movements of his child's breath, watched the precious lines of her little face, he felt himself falling in love. Every time she took a breath that seemed just a slight bit easier, he beamed. Every time she struggled for air, his pulse skyrocketed and he fought off the urge to clutch her tightly to his chest. She very nearly fit in his hand, blankets and all, but Stoick was the one wrapped around her tiny little fingers. Without meaning to, worn out by the stress of Val's long labor, Stoick dozed off slowly. Even in sleep, he held his daughter securely.

Bright light reached his closed eyes through thin eyelids, and he started awake. Morning. No. His daughter would be dead by now, her few hours dwindled away in the night. He meant to stay awake with her, to be alert for every last moment of her precious, short life. Panicked, he looked down at the bundle in his arms.

Wide eyes blinked up at him, and though she was still the tiniest thing he'd ever seen, Stoick heard no more of that horrible rasping sound when she breathed. She made it through the night, stubborn enough to beat everyone's expectations before she was a day old.

"Val. Val!" he shook his wife awake. She jolted awake, expression horrified. She was clearly panicked about their daughter. "She's alive Val! She made it through the night, she's even breathing better!"

"What?" Valhallaama scooped the baby out of his arms, peering down at the child, fingertips brushing the side of their daughter's face. "Oh, Gods above! She's alive! We're not out of the woods yet, but Stoick, she has a chance," Val beamed up at him, as she held the babe gently and rocked her without conscious intent. Hope brought life and joy to her face, and Stoick felt his own expression lighten in response. A sudden noise distracted both of them, and they looked down just in time to see the baby hiccup a second time. Val smiled impishly. "Her name is going to be Hiccup. If she's strong enough to

hiccup the morning after we were told her lungs were too weak to make it through the night, she's strong enough to become the greatest Viking we'll ever know."

And Hiccup had, in ways no one could have anticipated. Stoick regretted all the years he wasted griping about how she wasn't strong or fast or traditionally Viking-ish, but could not be more grateful that he'd had the past few years to make things right with his daughter. It would be easier to let her go her own way knowing that she wasn't leaving because he'd failed her as a father.

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><p>Unaware of his reminiscing, Hiccup stood up, her last checks complete. Toothless rumbled at her, in a tone Stoick had come to recognize as the dragon checking in with his rider that all was well. The chief watched as his daughter patted her dragon on the neck reassuringly, the early morning light bathing them in a radiant glow. He may hate seeing Hiccup go (and the dragon, to a lesser extent, although he'd never admit it), but sending her off with Toothless made the parting easier. There was no being in all the worlds who would take better care of her than that Night Fury; he'd seen the devotion day in and day out for three years. He'd seen the dragon put his own life on the line to save Hiccup, watched him fight off dragons easily three times larger with an unparalleled ferocity when she was at risk. Those two were more precious than life to one another.<p>

"We're ready," Hiccup said, her hand sliding off of Toothless' neck as she turned back to face her father. Stoick felt his throat go tight; this really was it. No more delays, no more last-minute preparations. He met Hiccup's eyes, and saw moisture gathering in them. Between that and her bittersweet smile, he couldn't take it anymore.

"Oh, Hiccup," he choked, just barely biting back a sob. Tears welled up in his own eyes as he stepped forward and swept her up in a bone-crushing hug. He heard a few small sobs escape Hiccup, even as she returned the hug, her scrawny arms squeezing as hard as she could manage. He was proud of the surprising strength they carried. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, Daddy," she whispered back, burying her face in his shoulder. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"Me too, Hiccup. So much. Promise you'll come back and visit when you can."

"Of course."

"Good girl. Be careful, trust your instincts. Trust the instincts of your dragon, too. There's no one in this world who can protect you as well as he can," Stoick admitted.

"You could," Hiccup responded in a small voice. His heart clenched, and he held her even tighter.

"Y'know, I imagine if I could breathe fire, we'd be pretty even," Stoick laughed softly, running one massive hand over the crown of Hiccup's head. Her hair was so soft, as it had been from the day she

was born. She giggled in response, finally loosening her grip. Stoick took his cue: it was time to let her go.

"I love you, Dad," she repeated, meeting his eyes as she smiled even though her cheeks were wet with tear tracks.

"I love you too, Hiccup. I'll be here whenever you decide to come back and visit," he promised, squeezing her hands to impress upon her his sincerity. She nodded, so Stoick finally let her go.

She turned back to her dragon, who fidgeted excitedly as she approached. With an ease that was astonishing even with years of practice, Hiccup swung herself on to Toothless' back. It took her only a second to clip her harness into the saddle. Then she looked over her shoulder, eyes bright and smile wide as she waved at the crowd that had gathered to see her off. Hundreds of hands waved back, children cheered, and Stoick felt a few tears fall from his eyes as the pair crouched in sync. Hiccup broke off her wave, and then they were in the sky with one powerful flap of Toothless' wings.

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><p>AN:** And there it is! Fav and review!**

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10. Freedom

A/N: Hey guys, I'm back! I'm still not sure how regular updates are going to be, but I have got a little more steam behind this story for the moment, so I'm optimistic I'll have some good stuff to write for a while yet. Enjoy this chapter, and please fave and review! Feedback keeps me motivated even when the writing is hard :)

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><p>Chapter Ten: Freedom

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><p>A great splash of water jarred Hiccup from her sleep. She gasped and bolted upright, both panicked and groggy. The girl came face to face with the culprit: Toothless was standing above the pallet she lay on, laughing at her with a few drops of water hanging off his chin.<p>

"Toothless!" she reproached, mouth hanging open.

This only made the Fury laugh harder, deep rumbling warbles coming from his chest.

"Alright, that's it, you're going down, bud!" Hiccup threatened despite the grin on her face. Without further warning, she lunged at the great black dragon. "You're no match for the might of the fearsome Hiccup!"

She crashed into the dragon's hide, wrapped both arms around his neck, and then flung them both to the ground. Or, she tried to, at least. What actually happened was she tried to use her weight to drag

them both down, but of course the attempt was ineffective. Her father, largest and strongest of all Vikings on Berk, was unable to overpower Toothless; scrawny Hiccup didn't even stand a chance. Still it was fun to roughhouse with Toothless even if it meant she never won.

So, instead of successfully tackling the dragon, Hiccup's mismatched feet scrabbled against the ground until they lost grip and slid out from under her. Hiccup was left hanging awkwardly off of Toothless' neck, and she heaved a long suffering sigh.

"You appear to have won this battle, worthy foe," she quipped, craning her head to look at Toothless' face. He met her gaze with his deadpan expression "mouth flat, eyes half-lidded" and huffed exasperatedly at her.

"Oh, don't you snort at me!" she scolded, still dangling sideways off of the dragon. "You didn't even try. Its no fun when you don't play back, killjoy."

Toothless narrowed his eyes at her, pupils narrowing to slits. Hiccup could practically hear him thinking '_oh, you want to play?_' at her.

"Oh no," she muttered, just as Toothless struck. He grabbed a mouthful of the back of her tunic (long and woolen, purposefully designed for sleeping in while she was off adventuring), effectively hoisting her legs off the ground. Hiccup released her grip on his neck, arms contorted to too much of an awkward angle. Even though she dangled helplessly by the back of her nightshirt, the rider fought back, flailing her limbs as wildly as possible.

"You'll never take me alive, fiend!" she cried as he started walking, laughing when she managed to clip Toothless' jaw with the back of her hand. He groaned and chirped reproachfully at her.

"You started it," she replied petulantly, pausing in her flailing to fold her arms across her chest. Hiccup liked to think she had mastered the art of looking stubborn and defiant despite clearly being at Toothless' mercy while they played.

Toothless grumbled smugly back at her as they continued moving, and Hiccup narrowed her eyes in response.

"What are you planning?" she asked, side-eyeing him.

Toothless didn't respond, but a few seconds later, he paused. Hiccup turned her gaze away from him, curious. Why had he stopped.

She looked down, only to see nothing but open air below her.

And some waves crashing over the rocky coast, a hundred feet below.

"Aaaaeeeeiiii!" she screeched, flailing brought back in full force as she tried to grab ahold of the dragon's neck once more. "Put me back, I surrender, I surrender!"

Toothless giggled (giggled!) around his mouthful of wool, and gently backed up until they were well away from the cliff edge. Then he

dropped Hiccup unceremoniously, and she landed with a thud on the young spring moss.

"Ooof," she grunted, rolling from her stomach onto her back so she could glare at her best friend. "You played dirty, you sneaky reptile."

Toothless settled on his haunches, giving her his best gummy grin in victory.

"You may have won the battle, but the war isn't over!" she cried, playfully shaking her fist at the Fury. He smirked, and without warning dropped on top of her. His scaly head landed on her chest, knocking the wind from Hiccup's lungs.

"Oh gods," she wheezed, pinned underneath a few thousand stones' worth of dragon muscle and scales. "Alright, alright, you've won the war," she admitted weakly.

Toothless chirped happily at her, and Hiccup couldn't help but grin back. Then he licked her face, and she laughed even as she pushed his scaly snout away.

"Ew! Gross!" she complained, swiping at the dragon saliva left behind. "I'm gonna smell like dragon breath for the rest of the day."

Toothless only chortled at her.

"Alright, you little snot, lets see how you like it!" and with that, Hiccup gave chase after the Fury, her hands still sticky with dragon spit. Toothless danced out of her reach, and she chased him back to their packs.

It was midmorning by the time the pair had ceased their goofing off and actually gotten ready for the day ahead. Hiccup was freshly washed, and had taken advantage of the tranquil location to wash some of her dirty clothes. As they didn't plan to leave the small but comfortable island until the next day, she'd hung her wet clothes off some low-hanging branches to air dry while she and Toothless took the day to adventure.

"Ready, bud?" Hiccup asked. Toothless bounded to her side, eager for the exploration to begin. She laughed, patting her dragon's snout, and the two left their campsite.

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><p>Late in the afternoon, Hiccup and Toothless found themselves on the shore of their little hideout. Hiccup lounged in the sand, delighting in digging troughs with her prosthetic and letting the cold, early spring seawater spill through the designs in the sand. Toothless lazed by her side, a bit worn from crashing through the brush all day. The island was almost completely overgrown — there were trails here and there that were worn down, but Hiccup assumed these came from whatever wildlife was around. Toothless had forged their trails all day long, as his size and strength made it much easier for him to push through the undergrowth than Hiccup. The past four days had been devoted to exploring the surrounding area via flight, but Hiccup wanted one day to explore their sanctuary on foot.

Toothless had grumbled discontentedly and rolled his eyes at this, but only in half-seriousness. He was much more graceful in the air, but he could manage a day on land.<p>

While they trekked around the island, Hiccup had been surprised to see no sign of other dragons. There were no burn marks around, or large swaths of crushed plant life. Toothless left the largest trails by far, and he wasn't even close to being considered a large dragon. She supposed it wasn't that unexpected; they'd been here for days now, surely if another dragon was nearby Toothless would have seen signs of it, or it would have picked up Toothless' scent and sought the Fury out.

Hiccup sighed, letting the cold water rush up her sand designs. She would have liked to see more dragons, but this just clearly wasn't the place. They'd move on tomorrow anyway.

She frowned. She knew where she wanted them to go next, but wasn't sure how Toothless would respond. It was a tricky subject to broach, that was for sure.

"Hey, Bud?" she called. Toothless perked up from his lounging at the sound of her voice. Hiccup beckoned him over with a tilt of her head, and he obeyed willingly, black paws completely noiseless on the soft sand. He stood by her at the edge of the gentle lapping waves, his own head tilted in curiosity.

"I've been thinking; while this aimless wandering is fun, and we've explored so many cool places, I thought it might be nice to have a goal. Not a long-term one or anything, but something that might, like, take a few weeks or something. Um. And it obviously would need your approval because it's kinda sorta completely about you. Well not about you, but up to you because it concerns you most. I mean, I'm obviously interested but it's not the same. That is, it wouldn't affect me the same way, I guess, and â€" "

Toothless nudged her with his snout, clearly taking pity on her as she got more and more flustered. '_What is it?_' was the clear sentiment in his eyes, his curiosity tempered with kindness to soothe Hiccup's nerves.

"I want to find other Night Furies," she blurted in one fast breath, then paused, heart pounding. It seemed so selfish to say aloud: as far as she could tell, Toothless had never given any indication of wanting to find more of his kind. She didn't know his history; perhaps he was the only Night Fury around for a reason, perhaps he had a bad past with others. Or â€" oh gods, what if he didn't _know_ if there were other Night Furies, what if he was the last and she'd just reminded him of that fate. Hiccup could feel the blood drain out of her face, and she glanced at Toothless: he looked just as frozen as she felt.

* * *

><p>Toothless was thunderstruck. He stared with wide eyes at his human, completely at a loss. Finding other of his race? He didn't know what to think.<p>

Sure, he knew of other Night Furies. He had hatched in a litter with two siblings (both female), and his sires had other litters before

his. In fact, his birthplace had been something of a haven to Furies. It was an island, north even of Berk, surrounded by hundreds of miles of ocean in every direction. That was part of what made it a preferable location for litter-raising; Night Furies were one of the few species of dragon with the flight speed, power, and endurance to cross hundreds of miles of ocean in one continuous flight. Most other airborne dragon species would fatigue and eventually drown due to the lack of any resting space. In addition to the safety it provided to hatchlings, it also provided solitude to the proud race of Dragons. Toothless' kind preferred to keep to themselves; isolated, aloof, distinct from the rest of dragon-kind.

It was part of the reason why he left, only a few decades into his life. Most hatchlings didn't leave Jan Mayen until well after their fifties. Some spent anywhere from decades to a century or two away from the nest, but most ultimately returned. Night Furies needed excitement and adventure and the chance to truly put their powers of flight to the test, and as such it was common for Furies to intermittently take decades-long trips and explore the world all through their long lifespans, but almost everyone came back to Jan Mayen, spent time at their origin between such sabbaticals.

But Toothless, even at the young age of thirty-eight, craved for something besides the proud posturing of his people. It was stifling â€" already he craved the challenge of flying hundreds of miles to a new landmass for the first time. He had always known his flight was exceptional, even amongst his kind. He had proven this many times over amongst his peers, and he was ready to leave them all behind, to show how truly great he was.

Of course, this caused conflict with some of his companions. Pride ran strong in their race, and no one took well to being outdone. While he was not afraid of conflict, the constant animosity from a select few over his talents had rapidly become tiresome.

Besides, though he'd never admit it, Toothless was vain. He had a beautiful hide, scales that perfectly struck that black-blue balance, and wings so graceful the winds should be envious. He didn't want to risk marring these features by fighting his discontent peers because they were jealous.

So he'd left. He'd left, and within two decades, his naivety had cost him the freedom he desired so much. He got caught up in the Queen's draw because he was young and foolish and cocky, and for over two hundred he'd been under her control. He hadn't lost himself to her the way other dragons had, protected somewhat by the fierce independence that his race cultivated, but ultimately his adventures were cut short, his actions dictated by the Queen. He never had the chance to explore the way he'd wanted, to find out who he was and what he wanted to become. It had taken the painful loss of his tailfin to jarr him out from under the Queen's control.

While his original plan had been derailed, and he was still humiliated that he lost himself to the control of another dragon, he'd found Hiccup as a result of the whole fiasco. And no adventure could compare to the joy of them learning who they wanted to be, together.

So while he had his reservations about going back to Jan Mayen, and admitting all his naïve mistakes and personal failings, he was proud

of who he'd become. He was a little curious to see if some of the Furies hatched around the same time as him were at Jan Mayen, and he did want to get word on his litter mates and sires. He had friends, way back before he left, it would be good to hear word of them.

His biggest worry, however, was Hiccup's safety. No human, as far as he knew, had ever befriended a dragon before, let alone a Night Fury. He wasn't sure how other Furies would take to the bond he shared with Hiccup, and the fact that he let her ride him. He wasn't sure they would understand, and he worried they would attack her for what could be perceived as a slight to their entire race. They would have to land in a very remote, deserted part of the island, and Toothless would have to approach his kind with caution. But he had to admit he was tempted.

Alright, he crooned at Hiccup, pressing his snout to her forehead. The tension that kept her small frame so rigid suddenly eased at the comforting gesture, and they both relaxed. Toothless looked straight at her and nodded once, clearly giving his consent to her plan. _We start tomorrow._

* * *

><p>AN:** And there it is! You got a little more backstory to Toothless' life this chapter, I hoped you liked it! As always, I look forward to your reviews, and I'm interested in your suggestions and what _you_ would like to see in this story. Your feedback is my guide!

Love, Rays

11. Stingers

A/N: I'm feeling generous today because I just finished a section of my thesis and my evil combustion homework that's now two weeks overdue and 29 pages long. So, in addition to the first chapter of a new oneshot series, "After It All" (go check it out!), I'm posting the next chapter of We Soar Above the Clouds! A bit of action and drama in this chapter, because we were kind of mellow and lacking for a while there. I don't know when the next chapter will be up, but classes end in a few weeks, so hopefully after that I'll have time to start writing some more.

Enjoy, and review! Your feedback is my guide! Tell me what you think of this chapter, or what you'd like to see happen next or maybe further on in the story, I might very well incorporate it! As always, feel free to PM any time. Sorry for the long hiatus, hopefully the next chapter will be up sooner!

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><p>Chapter eleven: Stingers

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><p>Hiccup sighed, sitting down by the stream and rubbing her tired foot. Their day of on-foot exploring had taken its toll in her poor, swollen foot and aching ankle and stump. She removed her boot, sighing in relief as she stuck her abused foot into the cold water of

the stream. The cold stung, but it also brought numbness and relief. There wasn't much she could do for her left leg at the moment; she'd made the short walk to the stream by herself, leaving Toothless at their campsite. He'd been oddly quiet and withdrawn since she brought up searching for other Night Furies.<p>

She frowned as she watched light slowly leech out of the sky. The sun had already set, but the horizon was still ablaze with orange and pink light. Hiccup hadn't seen any sign that Toothless was upset with her request, or she would have immediately backed off. But he had agreed, so his distance confused her.

Perhaps he was just lost in thought. She'd inferred that he hadn't seen any other Furies in a very very long time; maybe he was nervous about seeing his own again after such an extended absence. She didn't know much about Night Furies as a species, only Toothless as an individual. Maybe there was a history between Toothless and others of his kind; or maybe it was as simple as being nervous to return to his long-since abandoned home. Either way, she could tell he needed some time to himself, so she lingered by the stream as the light faded further.

There was very little light left in the sky when a sudden sound jolted her from her almost hypnotized gaze at the bubbling stream. It was the sound of a substantially-sized branch breaking â€" too loud to be caused by any small animals hopping about in the underbrush. No, that was the sound of an animal large enough to be a predator, lurking somewhere out of sight.

The fine hairs on Hiccup's neck rose. Toothless didn't lurk, not like that. If he wanted to hide, his dark hide made him damn near impossible to find, and he was the king of stealth. Something else must be hidden out of sight.

Slowly, Hiccup rose to her feet. Sudden movements could provoke an attack, so she kept her movements controlled and smooth. "Toothless," she called in a soft voice, then at normal speaking volume. "Toothless."

The stream wasn't far from there camp, but was it within his hearing range without her shouting?

Another sound came from her left; either the creature had moved nearly ninety degrees, or there was more than one about.

A pack? Hiccup thought, her blood running cold. She didn't normally feel afraid when encountering unknown creatures, but then again Toothless was usually right by her side during such escapades. Right now she was in unfamiliar territory, followed by an unfamiliar creature (_creatures?_), alone and with the last light fast disappearing.

She was definitely prey.

Another rustle, this time from her right and off to the side. Another, between the first and last rustles. Definitely a pack.

Screw trying not to provoke these creatures; she was surrounded and outnumbered and totally unarmed.

"Toothless!" she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Toothless, _help!_"

Hiccup's heart pounded so hard she thought her chest might burst in fear as she waited for another sound of approaching foes. Nothing, for a few panicked heartbeats.

And then a large shape burst out of the bushes. There was just enough light to see that it had large teeth and red eyes as the creature charged her in a frighteningly fast blur.

"TOOTHLESS!" she screamed.

* * *

><p>Toothless paused in the middle of a messy spiral of thoughts about returning to his birthland. Something was wrong; the world had gone too quiet. He tilted his ears about, trying to figure out why that bothered him. This island was quiet in general, such a hush shouldn't be a cause for worry. In fact, it should be a reassurance; quiet islands meant few animals around, which meant less cause to worry about something wild trying to eat his human. He'd had to kill a few bears and fight off a dragon or two over the years in order to keep Hiccup safe; she apparently smelled good to more than just him.<p>

His sensitive ears caught another faint sound, too quiet to be anything more than the slightest whisper on the wind. He strained, but couldn't tell what it was. Or more specifically, if it was human, if Hiccup was calling for him. Surely not; if she were in real trouble she would shout for him. As long as there was no shouting, all was well.

Barely a second later: "Toothless! Toothless, _help!_" reached his ears and the Night Fury leaped to his feet in a panic.

_Hiccup! I'm coming! _He roared in return, bounding toward the direction her cry for help came from. He launched himself into the sky; unoperated, his tailfin made his flight somewhat clumsy but it was faster than trying to forge through the forest on the ground. _Oh gods oh gods oh gods what's happened to her?!_

"TOOTHLESS!" she screamed, at the same instant a new scent hit him. It was the scent of another type of dragon, a whole pack of them.

Toothless' blood ran cold, and he pumped his wings faster. Amidst the smell of dragons, he'd caught the nauseating whiff of poison.

_Faster, faster! _Toothless urged himself on, racing over the tree tops as he swooped low, looking for any sign of Hiccup.

There, a clearing! There was a swarm of movement; a pack of small dragons all focused on the same point. Toothless dove, and the wind made its characteristic whistle over his wings. As much as he longed to loose his deadly plasma bolts at these dragons who dared attack his human, Toothless restrained himself. He didn't know precisely where Hiccup was in the throng, and couldn't risk hurting her by

accident. Instead he settled for his most fearsome roar as he swooped down. The small dragons scuttled out of his way, and Toothless landed right in the middle of a pack of eight dragons, all roughly the height of Stoick the Vast.

He spun around, roaring once more at the pack.

GIVE ME THE HUMAN!

Seven of the dragons cowered at his cry, but one gave a (pitiful in comparison) roar back at him. Toothless whirled to face the impudent creature, sizing it up. The dragon was a good foot taller than the rest, and judging by the way the other shuffled about restlessly, throwing it anxious glances, it was the leader as well. In addition to the ridiculous spiny fin attached to the head (a feature shared by the entire pack), this creature had swirling red stripes across its body, and a dangerous looking barb on its tail that was common to its brethren. Toothless sniffed warily " the scent of poison was strongest with this creature, he'd have to remember to stay out of range of that tail. Night Furies were less sensitive than most dragon species to poison in terms of fatality, but their flight was so delicately calibrated that even small amounts or weak poisons could ground them for up to a week.

You cannot steal our food, you flying heathen! The leader accused Toothless, puffing out its strange, flightless little wings in a way that would have made Toothless laugh were he not so frantic with worry over Hiccup.

_I am no heathen, you worthless grounded lizard. Where is she? Give her to me! _Toothless roared furiously.

The leader did not respond, but its eyes traitorously darted towards one of the other dragons.

Despite the fact that it was a terrible battle tactic, Toothless turned his attention away from the leader to face this other dragon. Sure enough, under its claws, Hiccup's prone figure sprawled across the ground.

HICCUP! Toothless cried, all thoughts but_ 'is she alive?' _wiped from his mind. In one lightning-fast move, he lunged at the unfortunate dragon. It skittered away at a shockingly fast pace, and Toothless was momentarily upset that he hadn't had the pleasure of ripping out the simpleton's throat with his mouth full of very much un-retracted sharp teeth. The flash of disappointment was wiped away as he realized in its rush of self-preservation the dragon had abandoned Hiccup, leaving her safe from any immediate harm. He had a feeling all was not over yet, so he quickly stood over her unconscious body; if these foolish creatures were going to attempt to recover their 'dinner', they'd have to go through him first.

He whipped his head back towards the leader, only to find a frighteningly fast blur rushing at him. Startled, Toothless fired one of his plasma bolts, but it was a sloppy job. With so little time to react, his fireball lacked it's lethal explosive nature. Normally, this wouldn't have been much of an issue as Night Fury fireballs were incredibly hot even when underpowered.

However, the leader simply paused momentarily in his

attack.

Toothless, startled by this unexpected failure of his fireballs, floundered for a moments as the eight stingers closed in around him, with their leader heading the charge. They were unbelievably fast runners, he thought frantically. He wasn't sure he could get off the ground in time to escape them, and as Hiccup was unconscious he'd have to carry her with his forepaws which would leave her close to the ground and vulnerable during takeoff. It was time to fight.

More prepared this time, although still without enough time to form a truly powerful blast, Toothless fired on the leader. It had enough of a punch to knock the stinger back, but not for long. Even as the leader got thrown, the rest of the pack closed in around him. Toothless hunkered down, curling around Hiccup and shielding her from the stinging dragons. The hide on his back and outside of his limbs was thick enough to protect him from the poisoned stingers for a little while, but he'd have to end this quickly. With enough time, the stingers would penetrate his scales and poison his blood.

End a fight quickly? Take off your opponents head, Toothless thought darkly as the leader stood up once more. He inhaled, and felt the plasma build up within his throat. The leader charged, once again at a speed that nearly made Toothless dizzy.

"Hold...hold," Hiccup's words from three years ago echoed faintly in his head. _"hold."_

The leader drew closer, poisoned barb raised and ready to stab right at his eye.

"NOW!"

Toothless fired, and this time the plasma bolt launched at full power. It hit the leader and exploded, throwing the dragon back into a tree so hard that Toothless heard a crunch. Suddenly, the other dragons ceased their assault on Toothless, instead staring at their fallen brother. The mass of blue and red scales remained motionless, and the rest of the pack broke out in chaos, scattering in all directions as they abandoned the fight and disappeared into the forest.

Toothless remained motionless save for the quick, heavy draw of breath for a few moments, waiting until all sounds of threat were gone before he exposed even an inch of Hiccup. When he finally deemed it safe, he spun around as fast as he could to check her for injuries. He sniffed over the length of her body, searching for the scent of blood or poison.

He pulled back sharply when he sniffed her left side.
Poison!

Toothless didn't dare scoop her up and try to carry her back to the campsite for fear of hurting her worse, but he _had _to see what had happened with the poison. Gently, so gently, he nudged her tunic with his snout until her ribs were exposed. There! A thin, shallow scratch crossed a few inches of Hiccup's skin, and it was this scratch that was the source of the poison. The Stingers had gotten her.

Toothless felt his limbs go weak with fear and desperation: he hadn't

been able to get to her in time. Those insolent creatures had gotten to her, poisoned her, possibly killed her. He let out a long, horrible warble of fear and grief.

Hiccup, I failed you, he screamed at the skies above him. _Skies above, let her not die! _

He quieted eventually, glancing back down at his rider's unresponsive form. Her chest rose and fell still; she was not dead, not yet. He leaned closer, laying an ear over her heart. It beat slowly, but never faltered or stuttered. In fact, it sounded much like her heartbeat while Hiccup slept. Hope rose in his throat.

Perhaps, the Stingers' poison was not meant to kill, but to incapacitate or paralyze their target so that it couldn't fight back. They were small dragons after all, paralyzing opponents would make it easier to eat, and easier to escape predators.

Toothless sniffed again at the small wound on Hiccup's side. The scent of poison made his stomach churn, but the skin around the wound didn't look as if it was dying. Surely, if the poison was lethal, it would start its destruction at the entry point?

He didn't know; without any poison of his own he lacked motivation to learn about effects of varying poisons, merely focused how to avoid getting struck with one. It didn't matter; he couldn't leave Hiccup alone and unprotected to seek out help, and even if he did there was no one around to help. He'd have to wait it out with her, protect her while she was vulnerable. Toothless settled on the ground, curling around his human protectively. He nuzzled the top of her head with his snout, the scent and tickle of her wild hair soothing his anxious mind, and draped a wing over Hiccup to shelter her from the cold.

He would lay here by her side until she recovered. If she did not recover, he would never again rise from this spot. There was simply no life without Hiccup.

* * *

><p>AN** : nothing quite like a good cliff-hanger to end on after such a long haitus, amiright?

Sorry, please don't be too angry. I have lots of plans in store for these two! Review, submit suggestions via PM, whatever you like. Feedback is my favorite thing!

End
file.